

# every artist wears a bunny head

by Jessie Mank

In the spring of 2002, I was working the midnight shift at a battery factory. I enjoyed the quiet solitude of the job, inspecting anodes and cathodes, laser-welding leads, knowing that just about everyone I knew was asleep. On my lunch break, I'd go out to the parking lot, lie on the hood of my car, and appreciate the night sky. Earth at night is a different planet than it is during the daytime. It demands less of you. It lets your senses rest—no glaring sun, no blistering heat, no traffic noise, and most of all, very few people.

I was a professional daydreamer, a once-promising-youngman who was now a college dropout, making batteries in the middle of the night.

One night I couldn't stop thinking about the Easter Bunny. That's someone's job, I thought. There's someone who goes to work, puts on a rabbit suit, and delights children with magic and mystery. It seemed like a secular way to dabble in faith and suspension of disbelief while so many others were observing a resurrection. When work ended that morning, I drove straight to the mall, walked straight to the Easter Bunny stand.

"How does one get a job as the Easter Bunny?" I asked.

It was an indirect question, but the woman on the other side of the table understood the implicit message.

"Well, we have all our Easter Bunnies for this season," she said. My face must have registered disappointment because she followed that with another sentence, as if to console me. "But sometimes there are last minute cancellations, or people quit. If you want, I can take your name and number, and if something comes up, I'll give you a call."

I wasn't even sure if I was there to actually apply for the Easter Bunny job or just to satisfy my curiosity about the application process, but given the opportunity, I wrote my name

and number on a scrap of paper, thanked her, and left.

Much to my surprise, when I got home there was already a message on my answering machine from that same woman, telling me that another bunny had cancelled. "We paged you in the mall," she said, "but you must have already left." I hoped with all my heart that there was at least one former classmate in the mall to hear this announcement, which I can only imagine was, "Jesse Mank, please report to the Easter Bunny stand." I called the woman back and, after a brief conversation, agreed to fill tomorrow's four-hour morning shift. It was that easy.

I wondered if I'd have to fill out a formal application, or if they would—I'm not sure how—run some kind of background check on me, but I was basically just ushered into a back room and told to put the costume on. As a woman sprayed out the head with Lysol, she gave my only instruction: no talking allowed. I could pantomime emotional reactions to the children, keeping in mind that the rabbit's eyes were about an inch above my actual head. They promised to periodically check on me for bathroom breaks.

I'm sure you know that it takes a certain kind of person to enjoy working the midnight shift, which is to say that I tend towards introversion. But exiting the back channels of the mall, protected by the anonymity of the bunny suit, produced a sudden if temporary change in me. I did a little dance. I hopped a few paces. Shook my tail. I waved to an elderly couple and did another little dance, mad with Bunny power. A majestic fool, a breathtaking buffoon. I don't think I've ever felt so carefree and uninhibited. I was the motherfucking Easter Bunny.

Once seated in my throne, I waved at the occasional passerby, but it was a long time before there were any children who wanted a photo with the Easter Bunny. How long? I can't say. Time disappears in the Bunny head. I almost reflexively raised my arm in order to check my watch, only to realize the futility of such a maneuver; my watch was buried beneath a sleeve of fur. Had five minutes passed? Twenty? An hour? It was impossible to tell. I was reminded of all the times that I was asked to bow my head for a surprisingly long minute of silence, except this time it was four hours of silence. And I was in the mall. Dressed as a rabbit. If I was to survive, I had to accept the subjectivity of time. It was all very zen.

I had a young nephew, so there was nothing awkward or unfamiliar about communing with children, but what I hadn't counted on were adults—or young adults—coming to take an ironic photo with the Easter Bunny. First, a young couple sat on my lap. They couldn't have been more than a year or two younger than me. With his arm wrapped tight around me, my right arm wrapped around him, the young man got close to the mesh screen of the bunny mouth so that he could verify my identity. I felt violated, like how I imagined it feels when a girl catches someone trying to look down her shirt. With nowhere to go, I did my best to crane my head to the back of the mask, my left arm wrapped around his girlfriend. Things were off to a peculiar start.

A little while later—how much later, I cannot know—four young blonde women sat on my lap, two on each leg. To convey my discomfort: if it were high school, they were cheerleaders, pretty and popular; I was the weird kid who wears T-shirts advertising bands that no one's ever heard of, the one who eats his lunch under the stairs, reading Kafka. I felt guilty, like I'd somehow tricked these girls into sitting on my lap. Even after they left, the sickly sweet smell of their combined perfume lingered in my fur as if to taunt me.

Finally, from a distance, I saw a little girl and her mother looking in my direction, very clearly preparing for a visit to the Easter Bunny. They remained distant for some time, looking in my direction. Mom crouched behind her standing daughter, whispering words of support while the poor kid steeled her nerves to visit a seven-foot rabbit with a frozen look of psychotic merriment on its face. I waved, and they waved back. Mom brushed the child's hair, smoothed out the kid's dress. More

waving, more conferring. Eventually, they approached the stand.

The first thing the child did was wordlessly hand me a tiny booklet, the kind that one might win with skee-ball tickets at a county fair. "Easter Bunny," the mom said in her best narrator's voice, "Audrey made you a book." I did my best to pantomime delight, placing my paws up to the costume's mouth before clutching at my heart. I accepted the book, but the constraints of the costume—furry paws and poor field of vision—did not allow me to inspect it. Audrey climbed onto my lap, we posed for a picture, and she hopped off, waving nervously over her shoulder as we—two complete strangers united by a surreal mythology—parted ways forever.

Romance led me here, but like so many romantic notions, I was struck by the alienation of the experience. When you're in that suit, you're not only cut off from the rest of the world, but you're cut off from yourself. Your hearing and vision are severely impaired. You can't talk. The sensory deprivation takes its psychic toll. In the entire four-hour shift, four children came to get their picture taken, but the four hours felt like eight, especially having been up all night at the battery factory. However, as I was taking off the suit in the back room, someone handed me an envelope filled with sixty dollars cash and asked me if I'd return tomorrow morning for the same shift. Of course I would.

Here are a few other things that you might not have considered about being the Easter Bunny.

First, if you have an itch on your face, there's absolutely nothing you can do. You will feel like you're vibrating. Or about to combust. But you can't allow the Easter Bunny to plunge a paw deep into its neck. That would be disturbing. Eventually, the desire to scratch the itch will go away.

Second, if you have to sneeze, against all social conditioning, you must sneeze in the bunny head with your mouth uncovered. You will think about all the previous occupants who have sneezed before you. You will feel like your head is sealed in a terrarium for germs.

Third, and this is the most important thing, being the Easter Bunny is lonely work. People wave to you. You wave back. Neither of you knows whom you're waving to. You're left with your thoughts in that suit, until even your thoughts fail you. Who am I? What am I? What am I doing here? You're all alone, and yet you're in public, on display. You are forced to lose everything, all while sitting in plain sight. Strangers sit on your lap. They walk away with a photo of you hidden behind a mask of synthetic fur. It's all at once absurd and mysterious, beautiful and terrifying.

It's a lot like being an artist.

Artists put themselves out there. They're on display. They enchant and ensnare people with magic and mystery. But the real work—no matter the discipline—happens in isolation. They work in figurative bunny heads, cut off from the world, but like Samson's hair, the bunny head is a source of strength. It allows the artist some semblance of confidence even when confidence is a

struggle. It works, but the nature of the arrangement never really allows the artist to take the head off and connect with the audience. It's lonely work.

Here's how I became an artist. I was a skinny, sensitive, and unathletic child with bad skin, a natural target for bullies, but I found that I could avoid beatings and mockery with my deft drawing skills. I was a latchkey kid, the child of an alcoholic, raised by an unstable single parent in a working poor neighborhood surrounded by train tracks and junkyards, but I found that I could count on positive attention if I invested myself in a painting. I was a socially awkward young adult, plagued by depression and anxiety, but I found that I could rally my peers with a guitar and a song.

Art allowed me to successfully interact with the world from a safe distance, working in solitude to be later rewarded with a sufficient substitute for love and acceptance. The artistic skills that I developed—survival skills, really—rewarded me a \$10,000 scholarship; they got me accepted to the School of Visual Arts in New York, and they got me accepted to the art departments at Syracuse and the University at Buffalo (where I ultimately attended). But those skills did not prevent me from getting so depressed that I dropped out after two years, losing my scholarship along the way. In fact, those skills indirectly led me to the third shift of a battery factory. They led me to working the morning shift as the mall Easter Bunny.

It's tempting to say that art saved me, but I think the truth is that art merely enabled me to barely survive, so long as I wore a figurative bunny head.

When someone asks me if I play an instrument, I used to say no, which is a preposterously brazen lie. I play a bunch of instruments—passably well enough to have written and recorded over 400 songs registered with BMI, though I've easily written hundreds more than that. I am the creator of Hussalonia—a recording project in which I somewhat anonymously write and record loosely-themed albums in varying genres, mostly all by myself. Because Hussalonia is not a band in the traditional sense, I refer to it as a “pop music cult,” and since all cults have belief systems, Hussalonia's beliefs are as follows—pop does not mean popular, balance production and consumption, and follow the muse blindly. All of this exists in the shadow of a fictional narrative about Nefarico™, a nonexistent soap company I've created that ostensibly owns Hussalonia. On my albums, I am credited only as The Hussalonia Founder at the behest of Nefarico™, who will sometimes inflict its corporate agenda by commanding me to write soap jingles and commercials.

If I've lost you, that's okay.

Hussalonia was engineered to be mysterious and evasive—and if I'm honest with myself, alienating. It's my figurative bunny head, except instead of it being cute and inviting, I've created some kind of troubling disfigured bunny that appeals only to those daring enough to approach it. It's not a very good

marketing strategy. And it strikes me now that, in addition to hiding in this weird bunny head, I'm working the proverbial midnight shift of pop music, existing on Earth at night, a world that expects less of me but is also essentially devoid of meaningful human connection. I rarely perform live; I do next to no publicity, and I've lied about Hussalonia's existence. Why? Because sometimes the very forces that compel one to make art are also the very forces that will sabotage an artist's ability to succeed. Like a baby's pacifier, art soothes the afflicted, but it doesn't necessarily nourish. For that, one needs substantive human interaction. The real deal. Love and acceptance.

Thankfully, I've found that.

I've spent a lifetime using art to cope with my emptiness, until I eventually found meaningful ways to fill it. My writer wife and I have been together for seventeen years. We have three wonderful daughters. I went back to school, got a master's degree, spent the last eight years teaching high school English. But I'm still damaged goods. The only way I feel comfortable interacting with the world is through a fictional ruse about a soap company and a pop music cult.

Every artist wears a bunny head, but some never learn how to survive without it. I think I'm finally learning. Do I play an instrument? Yes, in fact, I'm currently preparing a live show. Take my card. I'm ready to start sharing my art in a more meaningful way. I'm the motherfucking Hussalonia founder.

When I finished my first four-hour shift as the Easter Bunny, the first thing I did was open Audrey's book. She'd carefully drawn and labeled pictures of things she thought I'd like: carrots, baskets, eggs, rabbits, flowers, chocolate. On the final page she'd written, “I love you, Easter Bunny.” Reading those words in her earnest, childlike handwriting, I felt a formidable cocktail of conflicting emotions. On one hand, I felt guilty. I'm not the Easter Bunny, and I don't deserve this. Audrey believed in the Easter Bunny and I was complicit in her deception. I tricked a child! Her sincerity stood in stark contrast to my fraudulence, and I wished there was a way I could return the book. On the other hand, that little book was the nicest, most beautiful thing anyone's ever given to me. And though I was not the actual Easter Bunny, I felt honored to accept love on its behalf, to represent its magic. That book led me understand how important it was to preserve magic and mystery and lore in all its forms.

I still have Audrey's book, but it's stowed away in a box in the attic, a talisman too potent to keep in plain sight. Or maybe I'm just afraid of losing it. Either way, I'm comforted by the knowledge that it exists, a reminder that anyone can be an Easter Bunny, even a mixed-up fool like me. It's a perfect symbol for my artistic aspirations. I once inspired someone to confront something she simultaneously loved and feared. I inspired her to create something, and I inspired her to give it away. 