

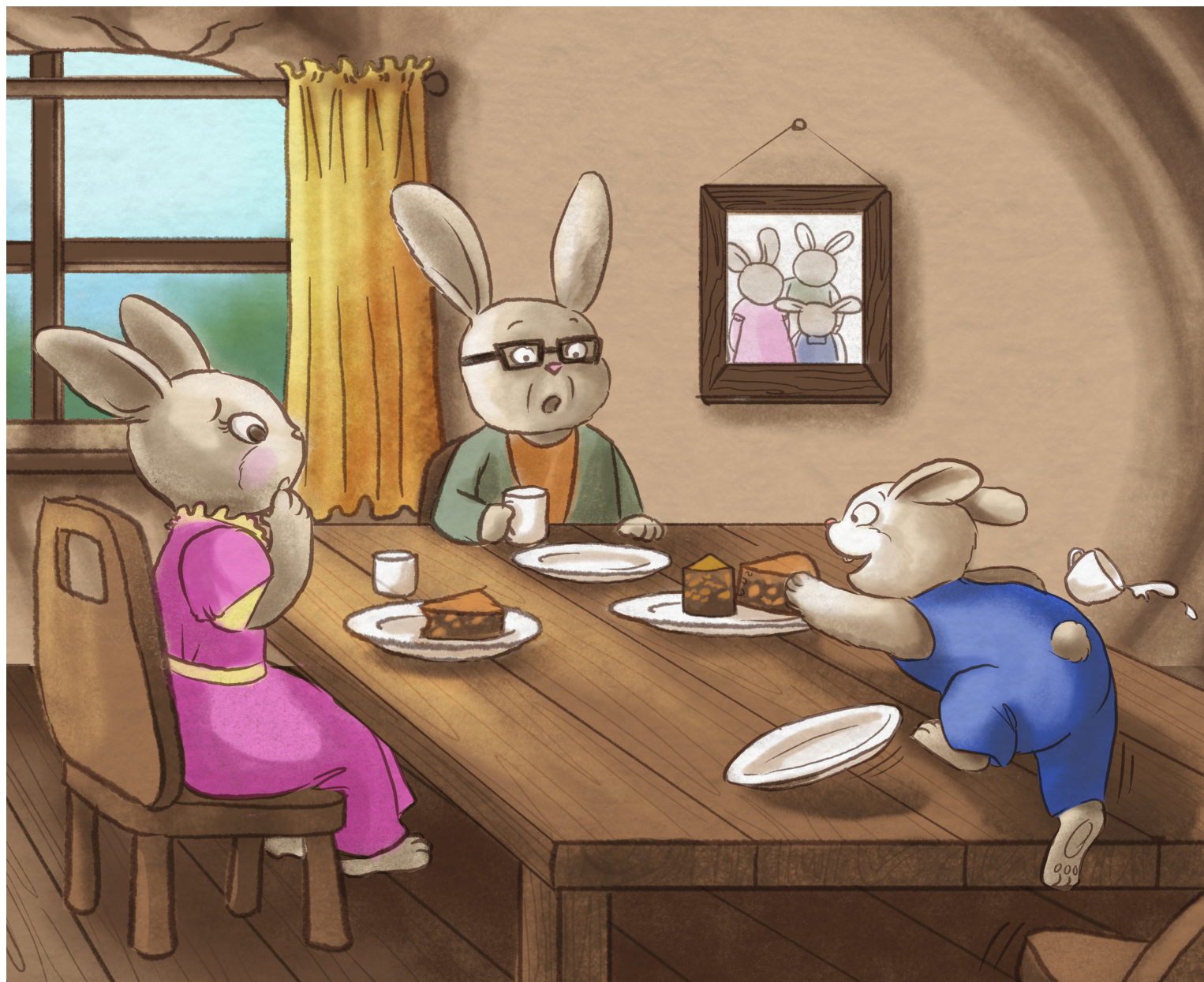
BILLY AND THE BEAST

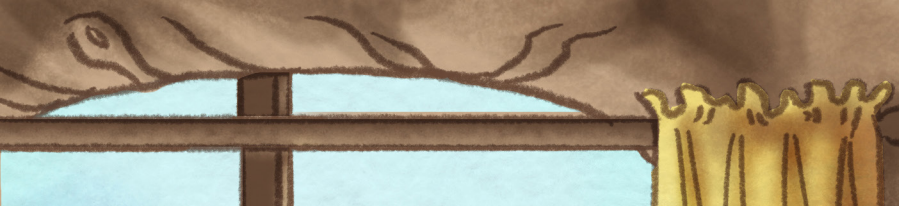
Rabbit Billy could not wait. Any moment now, ants—enticed by the honey water leading up to the Insta-Ant Farm Kit—would be lining up to join his ant farm. He would be the coolest rabbit in the school when he showed off his homegrown ant colony on show-and-tell day.

His mind filling with the compliments he knew he would soon be receiving, Billy climbed halfway across the table and returned to his chair with another piece of carrot cake.

“Oh dear,” Mother said. “It seems someone is forgetting his manners.”

But Billy was not listening. Before Mother or Father had finished their first piece of cake, he had already finished his *third* slice. Without excusing himself, he ran outside to where his ant kit was set up. He crept the last few steps, so as not to scare any ants away, and peered into the container. In the fading daylight, he squinted to see if anything moved. Were there any ants? No.





He had followed all the instructions that had accompanied the kit. This was supposed to work! Billy heaved a frustrated sigh. Now what would happen if he had no ants in his farm by Thursday? He'd have nothing to show to his class! And just that afternoon he had boasted to Badger Smogl that his ant farm would be better than the juggling tricks Smogl planned to show.

He kicked at the dirt and huffed and puffed. This was not good... *Wait! Do ants like carrot cake?* he wondered.

Racing back into the house, shoving past Mother and pushing in front of Father, Billy scooped up the very last piece of carrot cake—and good thing too, as if he had waited a second longer, it was about to be shared by Mother and Father!—and hurried back outside.

That night, as he went to sleep, he heard Father and Mother whispering about a certain rabbit who had been ill-behaved that day. He barely had time to wonder who that might be, for soon he was asleep, dreaming of ants. But only a few hours later, he woke.

Getting out of bed, he made his way to Mother and Father's room.

"Mother," he said, "we're out of honey, so I had to use cake as bait for my ant farm. Will you make some more tomorrow? Mother! Are you listening?"

Father made a growling sound, and Billy decided to go back to bed. He'd remind them in the morning.



The next day, Billy woke up excited about what the day would bring. But soon he was in a mood. Apparently, ants might not be the only creatures in the wood that liked carrot cake! There was no carrot cake in the ant container, and there were no ants there either.

He stomped about the house, slamming drawers and doors. And at the breakfast table, he scowled at his carrot porridge. He did not notice the concerned glances Father and Mother sent his way. He needed a new plan—and fast.



That day during story hour, Teacher Reamus was relating a tale that featured some scary beast that no one liked. There was some happy ending there, but Billy had heard the story before and had stopped paying attention. He tapped his fingers and toes, and wished he were outside trapping ants, or possibly getting Rabbit Isabelle's attention. Rabbit Isabelle, however, was looking at Badger Smogl. Billy was not pleased with this. Rabbit Isabelle was *his* friend, not Smogl's. If she was looking at anyone during class, it should be him!

He twirled his pencil between his fingers and cleared his throat. He was quite skilled at pencil twirling. He cleared his throat louder and twirled his pencil faster. Isabelle glanced his way, as did Teacher Reamus. Billy flushed and put his pencil down.

"Billy, perhaps you can tell us why the Beast was so disliked?" Teacher Reamus asked.

Fortunately, Billy remembered this story very well. "The Beast only ever thought of himself—never about anyone else."

"And why did that cause him to be banished?"

Billy thought of how the Beast had behaved in the story. "He never took a bath, so he was smelly?"

"Yes," agreed the teacher. "Most importantly, he only thought of himself."



During lunch break, Billy briefly wondered why no one sat with him for lunch, but those thoughts were quickly replaced with plotting ant-capture techniques.

On the way home from school, he hailed his best friend Hedgehog Alex and asked him if he'd like to help with his ant farm. "I ... uh ... have homework to do," said Alex before hurrying away.

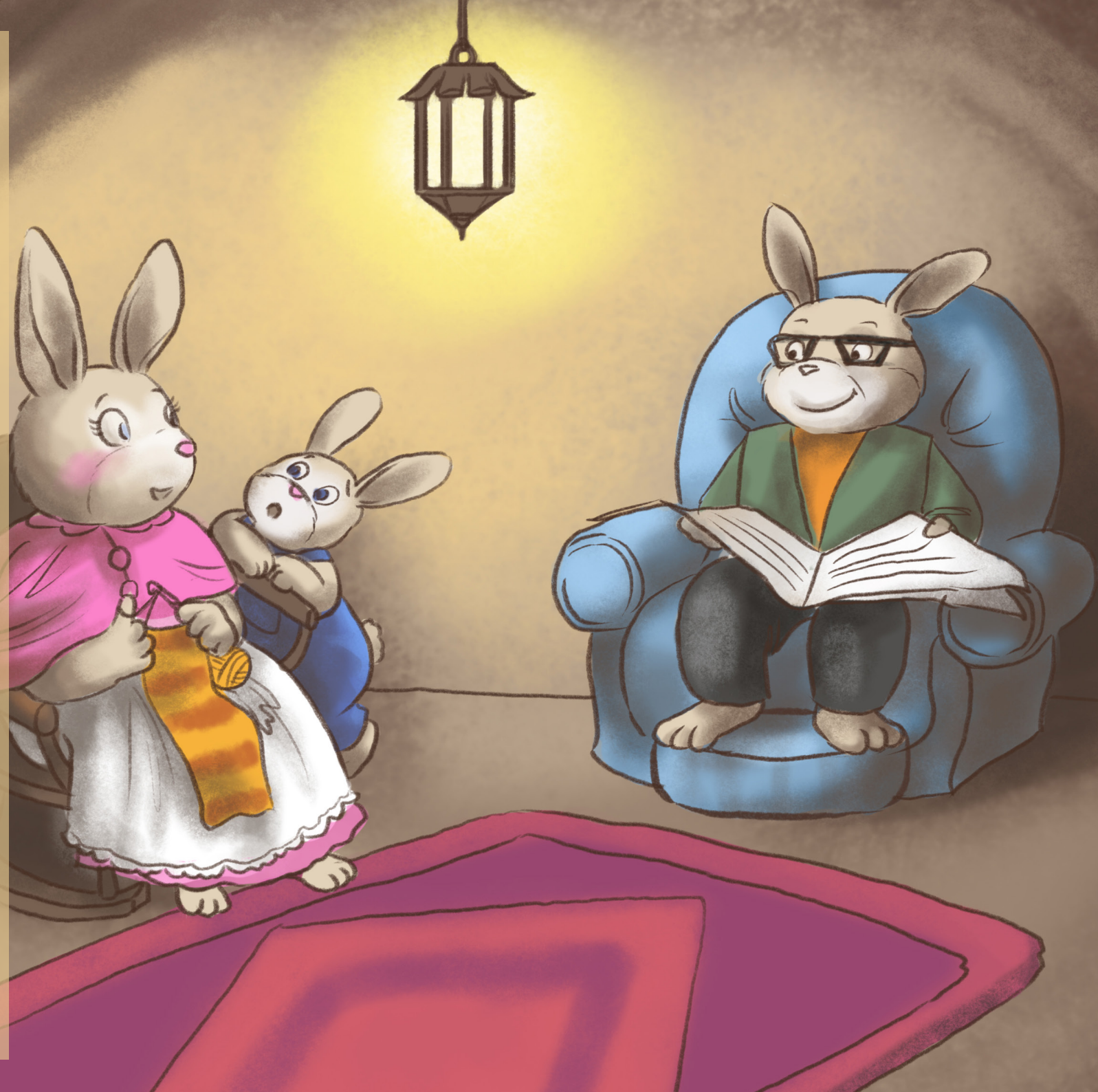
Recently, it seemed to Billy that he was alone quite a bit more than usual.



After dinner, Mother was talking of the crocheted scarves she was making for her nephews. Father was listening intently.

"When can we visit?" Billy asked. Billy loved his cousins. Even though they were still very small and were a lot of trouble, he thought they were awfully cute.

"Why, Billy," Mother said, "that's the first word I've heard out of you other than about your ant farm in a week!"





Billy was surprised. Surely he had talked about other things. He was sure that yesterday he had talked with Father about ... about better spots to set up his ant farm. Well, a few days ago he had talked with Alex about predators that preyed on ... ants.

"It's nice to have you back, son," Father said, with a chuckle.

"Back? I haven't been anywhere."

"Well, you eat each meal so quickly, we hardly have time to talk."

"Was I so terrible this past week?" asked Billy, concerned.

"No, dear," Mother said. "It's only that, when your mind is so full of only you, you forget

about the things that make our home life pleasant. For instance, would you like it if we had another Billy, who behaved just like you, in the house? Someone who climbed onto the table to grab food instead of asking for it to be passed, or who could only talk about himself all the time?"

Billy thought about his recent behavior and decided he would not like to have another Billy in the burrow. Not one who behaved how he had been behaving of late. He wondered if that was why the ants stayed away. And Alex too. He didn't want to be like that beast that no one wanted to be around. He decided that, starting now, he'd try to think more often about others. Truthfully, he'd felt rather lonely and a little sad these past few days. Only having himself for company was no fun.

That evening, by the light of dancing fireflies and the red glow of the sunset, Billy moved nervously to the glass container that was supposed to contain an ant farm. Tomorrow was show-and-tell day, and he desperately needed something to be wiggling about inside. Something was! It was a ... a beetle! A Rhinoceros beetle! And next to the beetle was an ant too.

Billy sighed, relieved that he had caught *something*. He wished he could share the good news with Alex. In fact, he knew his whole experiment would have been more fun if he could have shared it with Alex. But he had paid very little attention to the project Alex was preparing for show and tell. He felt sorry about that now.

"Alex! Alex!" Billy called out to his friend on the way to school. Alex stopped. He was carrying a board covered with a cloth in his hands. As Billy approached, he noticed a worried look on Alex's usually happy face.

"What's the matter, Alex?" Billy asked.

Alex set down his covered board and sniffed. "M-my project ... it's no good. Not as good as yours, anyway." Alex uncovered his board, showing off a small village made from twigs and nuts and leaves.



“Whoa, Alex. That must have taken you hours to make. It’s amazing. I wish I had thought of that.”

“Really?” Alex brightened a little. “I asked you if you wanted to help, but you said you were busy with your ant kit. I didn’t want to bother you.”

“Oh. I’ve been a bit of a beast this past week.” Billy flushed, then offered a small smile. “I think I would have had more fun if I had helped you with yours. I always have more fun when we do things together.”

“Me too,” Alex replied. “D-do you think my project is okay for show and tell?” Alex asked.

“Absolutely! Everyone will be awed by all the little houses—and look, you even included Mallard Pond!” Billy was happy for his friend. “Come on, let’s get to school and set up your project.”

Alex picked up his board once again and asked, “How’s your ant farm?”

“It’s all right. But next time, I’m going to do things differently.”

And as they walked the rest of the way to school, Billy thought how much better it felt inside when he thought of others and not just himself.

The End

