

*Fiction*

## Barlow and Guapa



*The way rabbits live makes more sense to me than the way people live.*

*-Marty Rubin*

They met one evening in early April in a roadside meadow whose grasses shimmered with the season's first colors. Barlow, a cottontail rabbit buck, had just emerged from the form (a shallow, scratched-out depression in the underbrush), where he rested during the day, and was grazing rapidly while keeping his ears alert to the sounds of any of the predators that feed on his kind. He would eat, excrete, and re-ingest partially digested food pellets, and was going in earnest through his feeding exercise when an odor caught his immediate attention: the pheromones of a female nearby.

This was Barlow's second mating season. He had coupled numerous times the previous year, and it had always been a pleasant, if brief, experience. He was eager to do it again and, dropping a half-eaten clump of grass, sat up on his back legs and gyrated his head trying to discover the potential love interest. Before long, he located the doe some distance away, almost hidden from view by a small rise in the ground and made more difficult to perceive by her gray and brown fur. She was a little larger than he, egg-shaped and pleasantly plump. The doe apparently had not noticed him, for she was grazing with the same intensity that he had only a few moments earlier.

Not wasting a second, Barlow hopped towards the doe, and when he was only a few feet away he began stalking her, trying to determine whether she was in heat and would be receptive to his advances.

Barlow was a fine specimen. His hind legs were unusually large and powerful, which would improve his chances of escaping predators. He was agile and strong and would sire kittens whose survival chances were excellent. He would, therefore, meet with approval of a doe in heat.

It was not long before she caught his scent. Barlow had been disappointed before by a doe running away, uninterested in making contact. This one, however, was playing coy, staying in place, looking furtively towards Barlow, and then glancing aside. As he drew nearer, she began stepping away as if to escape, but doing so slowly and showing no real urgency in her steps.

When it was clear that the doe was not likely to rebuff his advances, Barlow began circling closer and closer to his target, adopting a swaggering, stiff-legged walk that emphasized his physique, his fluffy white tail held high.

As Barlow's circling drew him closer to the doe, she faced him and boxed him lightly with her front paws. Barlow ignored the soft blows and continued to circle her, both animals now honking excitedly. Barlow then engaged in a series of courtship motions that included leaping, twisting, and turning, thereby parading his agility and strength before the female.

The mating dance continued until Barlow jumped straight up in the air. The doe also jumped straight up, signaling that it was time to take care of business. Barlow stood beside the doe and urinated on her to signify his earnestness.

Next, Barlow straddled the female with his forelegs and bit her neck as he penetrated her. After a few forceful thrusts, he ejaculated. He then fell to the side, panting.

Recovering from the exertions, they started nudging each other and nibbling at each other's fur. "I am Barlow" he sought his bites to convey. "And I am Guapa" she responded, in a series of breathless nibbles. The mating, though brief, had been quite enjoyable and they basked in the afterglow of their coupling.

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Based on their lovemaking, Barlow perceived that Guapa was an exceptionally responsive female that made him want to mate again soon. This was not to happen for a while, for immediately after their encounter Guapa ovulated and became pregnant; she remained unavailable for mating during her pregnancy. As she drew near term, she dug a burrow to create a grass nest for her litter, using her own fur to line the nest, providing insulation for the newborn kits.

Meanwhile, Barlow relocated to the proximity of the doe to keep her within sight. He established a new form, near Guapa's but still some distance away. From there, he was able to monitor the progress of Guapa's pregnancy and observe her building of a nest where she would house her litter.

One month to the day after their coupling, Guapa gave birth to seven kits, four male and three female. They were born hairless, deaf, and blind, totally dependent on their mother. The newborn were protected from the environment and predators by the nest made from Guapa's hair and her twice-a-day visits to feed and watch over her offspring. Each feeding was a momentous occasion, the kits kicking their little legs with joy as they sucked greedily the milk their mother provided.

The kits left the nest eventually and ventured into the world to make a living on their own. On seeing them for the first time as they emerged into the open, Barlow felt an obscure pride in his offspring, particularly the males, who like him had a distinctive white spot on the head, just above their large eyes.

Alas, only three members of the litter (two males and one female) survived to adulthood; two of the others died to unknown natural causes, one was run over by a car on the nearby road, and the last one was carried away by a barn owl. These casualties were not unusual, for disadvantaged species – as cottontail rabbits are – survive only on the strength of their numbers.

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Guapa was physically capable of engaging in a new sexual encounter soon after the litter was born, but remained involved with tending to her offspring and was not receptive to any advances; she would run away when a suitor approached. After the litter departed, however, Barlow succeeded in having another amorous encounter with her. Their mating this time was less coy than during their first meeting, but they engaged in their foreplay dance and subsequent intercourse with enthusiasm. After their coupling, they lingered together for quite some time, nuzzling each other. A sort of unusually close intimacy had developed between them.

Thirty-one days after their second coupling Guapa delivered a litter consisting of five kits, four bucks and a doe. Guapa's pregnancy had not gone well, perhaps because it had been a hot and dry summer. The landscape and the vegetation upon it were parched, and food was scarce. Guapa was weak and could nurse each kit for only a couple of minutes at every visit, needing to return to the nest time and again to rest. The kits experienced increasing undernourishment, resulting in two of the males dying from starvation, and the three survivors risking a similar fate.

Barlow was monitoring the situation from afar and noticed that Guapa was moving slowly and with obvious uncertainty, each time taking longer to visit the nest, feed the kits, and return to her form. On one of these trips, she dropped to the ground right outside the nest. She was exhausted and lay there trying to recover her strength, and then resumed the unsteady progress towards her shelter.

She had been out in the open only for a short while; long enough, however, to have her scent detected by a prairie rattlesnake that was making the rounds of the meadow in search of food. The light brown reptile was almost indistinguishable from the barren ground and the desiccated shrubs, and was slithering cautiously towards Guapa, who was too groggy to detect the peril.

As it moved closer, the rattlesnake raised its triangle-shaped head and prepared to lunge towards its prey. It leapt, but was met in inches from the ground by Barlow, who had been approaching at top speed and hopped in the air to execute a well-calculated collision. The two animals fell to the ground in a jumble, but Barlow immediately recovered, shaking his head to regain full alertness. He then kicked hard with his powerful hind legs to dart off, leading the snake away from its intended prey. While sprinting, Barlow used a bounding gait, pushing with his hind legs, stretching forward with his front legs, then pulling the hind legs under to leap again. He moved very fast, in a zig-zag pattern, his body close to the ground with the ears laid back.

The enraged rattlesnake gave chase, fury giving it an added measure of impetus, and was gaining on the randomly moving target. When it was only two or three inches away from Barlow, it lunged and bit the rabbit on the tail, eliciting a high-pitched scream from its victim. Instead of slowing, however, Barlow kicked harder with his hind legs and increased his lead over the predator.

After a couple of minutes, the snake gave up on the chase, turning back in search of its original intended meal. Guapa was nowhere to be seen, having found a hiding spot some distance away, far from the nest. The disappointed rattlesnake retreated and resumed its excursion through the meadow in search of food.

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Later, when they rejoined, Barlow and Guapa managed to convey their feelings about the incident. They communicated through soft grunts and purrs, and thumped their hind feet on the ground to emphasize their excited relief. Guapa's motions evidenced her gratitude at the hero that had saved her life and perhaps that of the entire litter. Barlow, for his part, shrugged his upper body noncommittally, uttering the equivalent of a deprecating thought along lines such as: "Good thing it was a ground-moving snake, not a flying hawk. Otherwise, I might not have been able to escape."

His bravado, however, was not destined to last. After a short while, Barlow exhibited the effects of the bite: his heart started to beat rapidly and he experienced tingling of the legs and lolling of the tongue. His tail area began to swell and, in a few moments, he went into shock.

Guapa groomed Barlow thoroughly, licking even the swollen area where the fang punctures marked the site of the attack, and nuzzled him in the intimate manner that had become familiar between them. To no avail; Barlow remained unresponsive to her ministrations, uttered a loud sigh, and expired.

Guapa circled slowly around Barlow's corpse, checking at every turn for a sign of life, unable to accept his passing and the loss of a lover who had given his life to preserve hers. Had he lived, perhaps they would have sustained many joyful encounters and countless litters in seasons to come. This, however, would never come to pass, and after a while the doe hopped away, surrendering Barlow's body to the carrion eaters.

Nature's demands are inflexible and, in a few weeks, Guapa would engage in another mating dance, a coupling, and the release into the world of another litter of little bucks and

does. But, in her heart of hearts, Guapa realized there would never be another buck that lovingly lifted her off her feet the way Barlow had.

*Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred and forty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in a wide range of anthologies and magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" is available on Amazon and other book outlets; additional anthologies of his work are scheduled for publication in 2025.*