Divine Men: Rabbit and the Lama

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January 2026

The Dalai Lama is Rabbit's spiritual brother. His arc from the mountains of Tibet to the global stage is a parallel to Rabbit's arc from a man born poor in a dying industrial town to living the American dream. The Dalai Lama is a divine figure, Rabbit is an everyman, yet both men are selected and perfected by God, but not without their own challenges and time in exile.

We first encounter the Lama in 1959, where Rabbit learns of the Dalai Lama going into exile, just as Rabbit attempts self-exile by absconding in the night. Both men have responsibilities to bear which compete with external and internal forces propelling them away from their kingdoms. In the Dalai Lama's case it is a kinetic war with China in Lhasa, and in Rabbit's case it is a war between mundane responsibilities of a dreary life and the unrealized potential of a town's favorite son who never did much worth mentioning after high school.

> . . . , Tibetans battle Chinese Communists in Lhasa, the whereabouts of the Dalai Lama, spiritual ruler of this remote and backward land, are unknown, a $250,000 trust fund has been left to a Park Avenue maid, Spring scheduled to arrive tomorrow), sports news (Yanks over Braves in Miami, somebody tied with somebody in St. Petersburg Open, scores in a local basketball tournament), weather (fair and seasonably warm), "The Happy Organ," "Turn Me Loose," a commercial for Savings Bank Life Insurance, "Rocksville, P-A" (Rabbit loves it), "A Picture No Artist Could Paint," a commercial for New Formula Barbasol Presto-Lather, the daily cleansing action tends to prevent skin blemishes and emulsifies something, "Pink Shoe Laces" by Dody Stevens, a letter about a little boy called Billy Tessman who was hit by a car and would appreciate cards or letters, "Petit Fleur," "Fungo" (great), a commercial for Wool-Tex All-Wool Suits, "Fall Out" by Henry Mancini, "Everybody Likes to Cha Cha Cha," a commercial for Lord's Grace Table Napkins and the gorgeous Last Supper Tablecloth, "The Beat of My Heart," a commercial for Speed-Shine Wax and Lanolin Clay, "Venus," and then the same news again. Where is the Dalai Lama?
>
> *Rabbit, Run*

Harry hopes to find something or someone who will validate his divine spark, like a rich and lithe young DuPont heiress who invites him to bed each night. In this earthly carnal realm, Harry expects female attention as his literal God-given right. What the Dalai Lama expects is less certain, but whatever it is it will be paid for with the mandate of Tibetan divinity.

> So perfect, so consistent is the freedom into which the clutter of the world has been vaporized by the simple trigger of his decision, that all ways seem equally good, all

> movements will put the same caressing pressure on his skin, and not an atom of his happiness would be altered if Tothero told him they were not going to meet two girls but two goats, and they were going not to Brewer but to Tibet. He adjusts his necktie with infinite attention, as if the little lines of this juncture of the Windsor knot, the collar of Tothero's shirt, and the base of his own throat were the arms of a star that will, when he is finished, extend outward to the rim of the universe. He is the Dalai Lama.
>
> *Rabbit, Run*

Rabbit, Run unfolds on top of a spiritual backdrop of competing theologies, those between the fruity Episcopal minister Eccles and the fire and brimstone minister Krupenbach. Eccles spends the most time with Rabbit, playing golf and injecting himself into Rabbit's tawdry business, with the intent of bringing Rabbit back into the fold with God and back home with his wife. Eccles abjectly fails, though Rabbit does go back to his wife, and almost goes to bed with Eccles' wife too. Eccles and his confused motivations and ramblings about God have little influence on Rabbit. Instead Rabbit has more spiritual influence on Eccles, as the only encounter and mention of Eccles comes in the second book.

There we learn that Eccles has left his church, his atheist wife has left him, and Eccles is now exploring meditation and exiting Plato's cave. By pure dint of existence, Rabbit has brought Eccles into Eastern philosophy without even attempting to do so. The Dalai Lama manages to touch people also by mere proximity, his aura emanating outwards and affecting others without his even trying.

> Again, the guffaw, the held jaw, the watchfulness. "I Eve in Philadelphia, basically. For a while I did youth work with the Y. M. C. A. I was a camp supervisor three summers in Vermont. Some winters, I've chosen just to read, to meditate. I think a very exciting thing is happening in Western consciousness and, laugh if you will, I'm making notes toward a book about it. What I think, in essence, is that, at long last, we're coming out of Plato's cave. How does 'Out from Plato's Cave' strike you as a title?"
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> *Rabbit Redux*

Our next encounter with the Dalai Lama comes in 1979. The Lama is no longer on the lam, instead he's touring the U.S. and talking to divinity schools and appearing on American talk shows. Like the Lama, Rabbit has made it through his time of exile and finds himself astride the top of the world, a wealthy and respected man, selling Westerners coveted Asian products. Americans in 1979 are anxious of rising energy prices and loss of military excellence as the country feels literally and existentially held hostage to powers outside its own control. The Lama offers a wary country an invitation to Eastern practices of equanimity and inner peacefulness; Rabbit offers fuel-efficient Japanese Corollas to a post-industrial town wary of gasoline shortages.

> Yet at moments it seems it has, there are just no words for it, it is not something you dig for but sits on the top of the table like an unopened dewy beer can. Not only is the Pope coming but the Dalai Lama they bounced out of Tibet twenty years ago is going around the U.S.A. talking to divinity schools and appearing on TV talk shows, Harry has always been curious about what it would feel like to be the Dalai Lama. A

> ball at the top of its arc, a leaf on the skin of a pond. A water strider in a way is what the mind is like, those dimples at the end of their legs where they don't break the skin of the water quite. When Harry was little God used to spread in the dark above his bed like that and then when the bed became strange and the girl in the next aisle grew armpit hair He entered into the blood and muscle and nerve as an odd command and now He had withdrawn, giving Harry the respect due from one well-off gentleman to another, but for a calling card left in the pit of the stomach, a bit of lead true as a plumb bob pulling Harry down toward all those leaden dead in the hollow earth below.
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> *Rabbit Is Rich*

Our next encounter with the Lama happens in 1989, the year of Rabbit's death, as he and his wife Janice entertain their grandchildren on various outings in Southern Florida. At the "Jungle Gardens", the family can pick the next attraction, either the Gardens of Christ or the Bird Show, and they all instinctively reject Christ and go to the Birds. It is here that the now corpulent Rabbit, in his infinite hunger, eats the food meant for the birds. Instead of taking in the Eucharist, Rabbit chooses bird pellets. The small quartet needed a win, and Jungle Gardens delivered. They were presented with Eden and a Tibetan version of Eden, and they chose Tibet. It provided an anecdote that still lives in the memory of that one time Grandpa ate the bird food. And just on cue and in place, Rabbit wonders how the Lama is faring, and wonders whether he believes in God if everyone keeps telling him that he is God.

> Jungle Gardens works out better than anyone dared hope. A big shop full of shells and corny artifacts like that stuff of Janice's back on the condo shelves opens into a miniature outdoors. You can go one way to the Reptile Show and the Gardens of Christ and the other to the Bird Show. They all turn toward the Bird Show, and watch tattered, disgruntled-looking parrots ride bicycles and see-saws and hop through hoops. Then a curving cement path, Jungle Trail, leads them along: you shuffle obediently past mossy roots and trickling rocks and at each turn confront some fresh mild wonder—a trio of spider monkeys with long hairy arms and little worried faces, then a cageful of finches whirring up and down, roost to roost, like the tireless works of a complicated clock, then a bo-tree such as Buddha was illuminated under. Rabbit wonders how the Dalai Lama is doing, after all that exile. Do you still believe in God, if people keep telling you you are God?
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> *Rabbit at Rest*

In Rabbit's case, he certainly believes in God, and he remembers crusty Krupenbach and his time in Sunday school. But Rabbit's conception of God isn't per se a Christian one, certainly not one where Rabbit feels compelled to follow the Ten Commandments—nor does he feel any guilt when partaking deeply in earthly sins and delights. But at least Krupenbach made a mark. Rabbit doesn't think of Eccles at all, a curious omission, considering how much golf Rabbit plays in later years; yet he never reminisces about his time as a young man playing golf every Tuesday with the curious and anxious minister, whose wife he once proudly fondled.

In the end Rabbit's body falls to earthly wounds of blocked arteries and a thick midsection. But the divine spirit will be reincarnated, just as a new Lama will be chosen, Rabbit's spirit vibe will find new realization. The location of that realization, just like the appearance of the new Lama, can happen in strange, unexpected places.

Though Rabbit is dead, he lives on as a kind of a dark force between Ronnie and Nelson. Ronnie, his one-time teammate and rival, and Nelson, his neglected son, were the two men most antagonized by Rabbit's existence and his carefree demeanor. Ronnie and Nelson now find themselves sharing the same roof as stepson and stepfather. The two are belligerents, the old adage of my enemy's enemy is my friend did not come to be between them. That is perhaps because Rabbit wasn't an enemy, he was a non-combatant who unintentionally caused mayhem wherever he went. The real reason for the enmity felt between Nelson and Ronnie towards Rabbit was that he never seemed to have to pay the price for the destruction he wrought. It is the envy men have of God himself, and the kind of jealousy that can only destroy a mortal and leave God blithely unaffected.

We see this theme come to a close as Ronnie offers Nelson a kind of peace offering, a book and talisman of their shared connection. It is a bewildering gift that neither man likely understands, but nonetheless a force greater than either intercedes. For Christmas, Ronnie gives to Nelson a book by the Dalai Lama, the "Art of Happiness." Again, we see a juxtaposition of the Christian world with the Eastern one. The two do not know how to understand it, but it comes at a point of detente and hopefulness. Nelson has a career that suits him and the chance of reconciliation with his estranged wife, and Ronnie has found companionship and equanimity after becoming a widower. After the death of the man who caused both of them so much heartache, they can now maybe appreciate his divine lessons, his ability as a survivor and a raconteur able to enjoy life and its earthly delights without entirely abandoning God.

> Ronnie has come up with a strange gift, some kind of a needle: "The Art of Happiness", by the Dalai Lama and an American doctor. Nelson is startled because, in unwrapping, the saintly Asian on the jacket at first peek suggests his late father, not so much physically as in the aura of sly alertness, a tentative tricky lovable something in the guarded smile. Ron explains, in his insurance-selling voice, "I thought since you disdain the Christian religion maybe something along other lines would appeal to you. It's very important, Nelson, to have a spiritual outlet in our lives. There's a tremendous, worldwide upwelling of spirituality to greet the new millennium." He sounds like he's quoting somebody.
> *Rabbit Remembered*

> The very motion of our life is towards happiness.' End quote." "What's that from?" "From a very dumb book Ronnie Harrison gave me for Christmas. It's on page one, which is as far as I've gotten." "Maybe you should go on to page two."
> *Rabbit Remembered*