

Papa Rat

by Brian Plante

Through the infra red glasses Dennis saw a half dozen orange patches moving along the wall, congregating on a spot behind the kitchen table. Billy, dressed in a reflecting Faraday suit, quietly tiptoed to the area and set up the microwave projector in front of the wall where Dennis pointed. Dennis motioned right, then left, and Billy moved the projector to his signals until it was centered directly over the hot spots.

"Zap 'em," Dennis whispered.

Billy powered up the microwave and the orange spots burst into incandescence in Dennis's heat-sensing glasses as the targets absorbed the microwaves. Within seconds the bright spots stopped moving.

"That's enough," Dennis called to Billy, no longer whispering. "We don't want them to cook." Dennis always hated the smell when Billy got too eager with the microwave, and it was bad for business.

Billy cut the power to the microwave projector and started packing up the electronics. Dennis used a stud sensor and marked the centers on either side of the hot spot, and then cut into the wallboard with his utility knife. In a few minutes he had the wall opened to reveal the nest.

One adult brown rat, probably the mother, and four young ones. Damn, thought Dennis, he had counted six through the glasses. And it was definitely the nest of a smart rat. If it was the smart one that got away, it would be long gone by now, so Dennis packed away the infra reds.

While Billy put away the equipment, Dennis examined the nest. It was typical for a smart rat's nest. Orderly. Paper cups and jar lids filled with cereals and vegetable matter. Neatly arranged rows of buttons, beads, coins, a few pieces of cheap jewelry, and a couple of marbles; the smart ones liked shiny objects and tended to collect them. Above the stockpile of items, stuck in a hole in the stud, was a lone yellow dandelion flower.

Dennis cleaned up the mess, throwing the dead rats and their hoard in a plastic grocery bag. Reaching lastly for the dandelion flower, a brown blur entered his field of vision, dropping down from the void between the walls and landing directly on the back of his outstretched hand.

Dennis flinched as he recognized the brown ball of fur as his escapee. It was a big one, probably the male of the group. Papa Rat. The rat clung tightly onto the back of his leather work glove, staring defiantly at Dennis with its beady black eyes. Dennis shook his hand several times but the rat held on fast. When Dennis stopped shaking his hand, the rat quickly scrambled up to his wrist and bit into the exposed flesh between the glove and his shirtsleeve.

Dennis let out a yelp and whacked both his hand and the rat into the wall. The rat fell to the floor, stunned.

"Son of a bitch!" Dennis yelled. "Did you see that? Damn rat came out of the wall and bit me."

Billy came over to look at the bite mark, which was already filling with blood. "Jeez. You better wash it out good, man. You never know what kind of diseases the friggin' rats are carrying."

Dennis walked over to the kitchen faucet and ran some water. He found some Palmolive dish soap in the cabinet under the sink, squirted some onto his bleeding wrist, and lathered it up under the running water. The owner of the co-op was out, as was usual when the exterminators were nuking smart rats, so he

explored a few cabinets until he found some Band-Aids.

"You know," said Billy, "you probably should see a doctor about that. It might have had rabies."

"It damn well better not. I can't afford to go to no doctor right now," Dennis said, applying the Band-Aid. "Corva and I have been going bareback on insurance the last couple of years. It's just too expensive."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I went without medical all last year," said Billy. "But rabies is nothing to mess around with."

Dennis looked at the rat on the floor, still lying there crumpled against the baseboard. Taking a closer look, Dennis could see that the rat was still alive, its little chest rising and falling in rapid, shallow breaths.

"Tell you what, Billy. I'll just hold onto this rat for a while. If it shows any signs of being sick, then I'll go to the doctor."

"It's your life, man."

Dennis went back to one of the cabinets he had opened earlier and grabbed a large Tupperware salad bowl with a blue lid. He scooped up the dazed rat and put it in the bowl. With his utility knife, he cut a few air holes in the lid.

"Papa Rat, you're coming with me," he said as he sealed up the bowl.

"Come on," Billy said, "lets close up this wall and get out of here."

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Dennis bartered some future services for a battered old bird cage from a pet store on the East Side and brought it home to his dingy apartment. Corva watched in horror as he set the cage up on the living room coffee table and removed Papa Rat from the Tupperware bowl.

"What is that!" she shrieked. "Just what do you think you're doing with a rat in my home? Not even a pet rat, but an ugly street rat?"

"This rat bit me," Dennis said sternly. "I gotta watch it to make sure it don't have rabies. I'll go see the doctor if it does."

Dennis was expecting more of a protest, but Corva just said, "Oh," and exited the room. Dennis was thankful that he didn't have to argue the point about not having enough money for doctors right now. Corva knew how things were.

In the bird cage, the rat began moving about, balancing on the wires in the cage floor. Dennis watched as it systematically inspected each joint in the metal, looking for a weak spot. The clasp holding the cage door shut looked flimsy to Dennis, and he had no doubt that a smart rat would be able to figure it out before very long. He got out his soldering iron and melted some metal onto the clasp to make sure. The rat backed up into the far corner of the cage and wriggled his nose at the acrid fumes from the smoking solder. Smart or not, the rat was welded into the cage for good.

Dennis slid yesterday's newspaper under the cage to catch the droppings, and put some water in the bottle fixed to the side. He knew rats would eat just about anything, so he filled the little metal dish inside the cage with some Rice Krispies, using a piece of rolled up paper as a funnel to deposit the cereal through the bars.

After a while, Corva came back into the room. Her eyes were wet and red.

"Dennis, we can't go on like this."

"Don't worry Honey, it's only for a few weeks. If the rat doesn't get sick..."

"No, no, no. Not the rat. It's everything. Your job, my job, this crummy little apartment. Not being able to afford a doctor when we need one."

Dennis looked at her with plaintive eyes. "We've been over this before."

"But nothing changes, Dennis. What kind of future do we have? Don't you want to do more, be more, than just a...a rat catcher?"

Dennis was stung by the words. "Everybody can't be a rocket scientist, Corva. Jeez, you're sharing that receptionist job of yours with two other women, so don't go pointing any fingers at me. I'm just doing the best I can, okay?"

"It's not the best. There's lots of people doing better. When we got married, I had no idea it would be like this."

Dennis hated when she did this to him. He had tried, really tried, to build up the exterminating business and make a decent living, but money was just too scarce. There were better ways to make money in New York, but whatever the magic formula was, Dennis had not hit upon it yet.

"Honey, it's like this all over the city. Lots of jobs are moving down south and offshore. It's real slim pickings out there. Besides, being an exterminator isn't such a bad job these days since the rats started gettin' smart. They don't fall for poison or traps like they used to. It's almost a high-tech thing now, and it's a little easier to make a buck than in the old days when all I did was spray for cockroaches."

Corva shuddered and a tear rolled down her cheek. "Come on, Dennis, we can't even take care of our own son!"

Dennis's face flushed red with embarrassment. She wasn't playing fair, he thought. Even people with better jobs couldn't afford to take care of kids like Kevin full-time.

"Yeah, thanks for reminding me," Dennis said, disgusted with himself. "I'm going over to the nursing home to see him in a few minutes. Do you want to come?"

"No, I went earlier today. The nights are yours."

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Kevin sat slumped in one of the day room's graffiti-covered plastic chairs, and Dennis sat next to him rather than across the table so he could catch the boy if he tipped over. Even though the boy was eleven, he still had not mastered as basic a skill as sitting up properly. While Dennis talked, he fed Kevin spoonfuls of ice cream purchased from a vending machine. It was Kevin's favorite, and even when money was tight Dennis could always afford enough change for the machine and give his only child some tiny bit of pleasure in his otherwise miserable existence.

"We've got a new pet back home," Dennis said, putting the cup of ice cream down on the table. "It's a rat. One of the really smart ones. I caught him at work today. I call him Papa Rat."

Kevin's vacant eyes met his father's briefly, then he directed his gaze back at the cup of ice cream. He opened his mouth and moaned an animal sound, pleading for the next spoonful.

"Not all rats are smart," Dennis said. "Did you know that? Most are just regular rats, and they're easy to catch. But the smart ones make it a lot tougher. Even the dumb ones are harder to catch when a smart one is around, 'cause the smart ones look out for the dumb ones. One smart one is all a rat family needs."

Dennis dished up some more ice cream and Kevin reached out with a shaky arm and knocked the spoonful into his lap. Dennis put the spoon down and dabbed at the mess with a paper napkin.

"Oh Kevin. We should be playing ball and going to the circus. You have no idea what I'm saying, do you? If I could find a way to make things better...Your mother's right. This really is no way to live."

Kevin stared at the ice cream.

"It's all my fault," Dennis continued. "All that bug spray I used to use back in the old days. I'll probably pay for it down the road with some kind of cancer or something, but it's just not fair for you to have to suffer, to be in a place like this. I just want to make things better for you and your Mom, that's all."

Kevin finished the last of the ice cream, and Dennis wiped the drips from his mouth. The boy barely responded when Kevin hugged him. Soon, visiting time was over and Dennis was chased out by the staff and went back home.

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Another long week went by and Dennis kept hard at work. Billy had been out sick for three days in a row and Dennis kept the exterminating business going all by himself until Billy finally came back to work.

"How you feeling, Billy?" Dennis asked, eyeing Billy suspiciously.

"Okay. How's that rat you been keeping? No sign of rabies or nothing yet?"

"To tell you the truth, I haven't seen the rat much for a couple of days. It's the craziest thing. Papa Rat just grabbed all the newspapers I put under the cage and covered the inside of the cage with it. Kind of like wallpaper."

"Weird."

"I rip it down to check on the little guy once in a while, but Papa Rat just puts it right back up again when I'm gone."

"Maybe it likes its privacy. Those smart ones are weird. So, where are we going first today, Dennis?"

"Well normally we'd bomb Cacciatore's," Dennis said in a serious tone, "or do some ratting in the Alpine." Dennis watched Billy's reaction. Billy's face didn't give anything away, but Dennis was sure of something.

"So what's the problem?" Billy asked. "Let's get to work."

"Well, Billy, the problem is I called ahead, and both of them said they didn't need us this month. Imagine those rat-holes not needing an exterminator."

"Wow, that's odd. Maybe they got someone else."

"Yeah, I thought of that too. And then I got this brilliant idea. I looked at the customer invoices going

back six months. And you know something funny?"

"What's that, Dennis?"

"We always seem to lose a steady customer or two right after you take a day off. In fact, since I hired you, for every two new customers I bring in, it seems that I've lost one old-timer."

"So what are you saying, Dennis? You don't think I'm doing anything, do you?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm certain of it. I can't believe how stupid I've been not to notice it before. You have your own business on the side and you're siphoning off my regulars. Jeez, it couldn't have been more obvious. I asked Ralph over at the Flagship flat out and he told me all about how you've been coming around. So get out of here, Billy; you're fired."

"But..." Billy saw he was through. He slapped his newspaper on the table and stormed out.

Now what am I going to do? thought Dennis. The past two days working alone had been a real grind. The rats were getting harder and harder to catch, and the animal rights people were getting more and more adamant about not killing the smart ones. Maybe it was time to think about a career change.

Dennis picked up Billy's newspaper, intending to turn to the meager listing of jobs in the back, but the pages and pages of stock prices in the financial section caught his eye first. Lots of people make real money from these numbers, Dennis thought. How hard can it be to figure this stuff out?

Dennis decided to take the rest of the day off. For the first time since he was in high school, he visited the big public library on Fifth Avenue.

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"I heard you fired Billy," Corva said, several weeks after the fact. "How are you going to carry that business without some help?"

"I don't need Billy any more," Dennis said, entering the apartment with a stack of magazines under his arm. "He was no good."

Corva gave Dennis a despondent look and he knew they were going to argue about money again unless he changed the subject before she got started. Maybe it was time to tell her what he had been up to lately.

"Corva, I'm not a rat catcher any more. I closed the business over a week ago."

Corva's mouth hung wide open in a silent "O" and she stared at him, unbelieving.

"I sold the equipment and put the money into the stock market. Options, to be precise. Puts and calls, they're called. You can make a lot of money fast with options. You can lose fast too, if you're not careful."

"Huh? Dennis, what are you talking about? You don't know anything about the stock market."

"I've been studying up on this for a little while," Dennis said confidently. "It's not nearly as hard as most people think it is. In only a couple of weeks I'm up twelve thousand. Just on paper, that is."

"Huh? Is this for real?"

"It's all right, Honey. I know what I'm doing."

Corva continued staring and shook her head in dismay. "Is this what all the magazines are for?"

"These?" Dennis said, looking down at the stack. "No, these are biological abstracts. I've been looking into the literature on these smart rats. It seems it's caused by a virus."

"Huh?"

"A virus. Maybe something that got out of a lab when one of the subjects got too smart for the experimenter. It somehow activates the unused parts of the rat's brain. Some of the rats get smart. Nearly all the rats have the virus by now, but only one in ten thousand is predisposed to becoming a 'smart' rat. It's some sort of genetic quirk, so they say. All the children of the smart rats have the same predisposition, and the smart ones are better survivors, so it's inevitable that the smart rats will eventually take over the whole rat population before too long."

Corva looked at the newspaper-shrouded cage on the coffee table. "You mean that thing in the cage has a virus?" she said with a quiver of concern in her voice.

"Without a doubt."

Dennis walked over to the cage and started pulling the paper away through the cage. When enough paper was cleared away, he peeked inside. The stainless steel spout had been removed from the water bottle, allowing the water to drip into the layer of newspaper below. The tubular spout had been wedged between the metal feeding dish and the cage wires and manipulated to spread the wires in one spot to make a small gap. A lever and a fulcrum.

The rat was gone.

"Good luck, Papa Rat," Dennis said. "Sorry about what I did to your family."

"That thing's not loose in my home, is it?"

"Long gone, I'm afraid. The little critter even replaced the newspaper on the cage after he got out to give himself a good head start. I think I'll miss him a bit, won't you?"

"Yuck! Are you serious?"

"Anyway, I need to speak to you about something really important. It's about Kevin."

"Kevin? What about Kevin?"

"Well, I was asking around at the nursing home. About you."

"Me?"

"Yes. Forgive me, but I just had this sneaking suspicion. And it turned out to be true. A lot of things have been becoming clearer to me lately. I asked the nursing staff about your visits. Imagine my surprise when they told me you've only been over to visit Kevin a handful of times in the past few months."

Corva's face flushed deep red. "I, um...Dennis! You have to understand. It's so hard. I just can't stand that place. You know I love him!"

"Yes, I believe you do. But fair is fair. You were supposed to visit him on days when you weren't working and I would see him after work. We agreed. The boy needs to know he's not alone in a place like that."

"I...okay. You're right. I'm sorry."

"Good. I'm going out now to see our son."

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"So your Mom is really sorry she's missed some visits, Kevin. I'm sure she'll be in tomorrow though."

Kevin stared longingly at the cup of ice cream on the table and moaned.

"You see, the problem with your mother is that she's unhappy with the way her life has turned out. Mostly she's unhappy with me, but I think that that's going to change now. I'm getting a little smarter."

Dennis gave Kevin the spoon and let him fumble around sloppily with the ice cream to keep him occupied while he took out his utility knife. He didn't want Kevin to see the knife.

"If we stick it out for another year or two, I think we can make enough money to escape from this city. Get out of the rat race and start fresh someplace new. I'll bet you agree that's for the best, don't you, Kevin?"

Kevin seemed to nod his assent, but Dennis knew the boy was only reacting to the positive tone of his voice and the desire for more ice cream.

"Did I tell you Papa Rat finally escaped? I've been thinking a lot about how these smart rats live. The smart ones always seem to care for the regular rats, like it's their duty. They're very loyal. I think that's a smart way to be."

Kevin was absorbed in the ice cream. Dennis glanced around to make sure no one was watching and raised the knife. He quickly slashed a shallow one-inch cut at the base of Kevin's thumb. Kevin dropped the ice cream cup and howled. Dennis quickly slashed his own thumb similarly and pressed his bleeding hand into his son's, mixing Kevin's blood with his own.

"Easy now, Kevin. It's only a scratch. They say once in a very long while, a virus can mutate and jump from one species to another. I'll bet you didn't know that."

Kevin just looked at the blood on his hand and kept crying. A few staff members came into the room to see what the noise was all about, but Dennis didn't care now. His task accomplished, Dennis hugged the boy and began to cry, too.

Things would get better soon.