

The Rats

by Charles Wheeler

I

He is standing on the sofa in the living room. I can see him from the alley. The curtains are open and the lights are on. He is standing on the sofa. He looks tired, schizoid. Like he hasn't slept. Hasn't shaved - a patchy beard is coming through. He's looking around the floor. The kitchen, the next room down left towards the back of the house, has its windows open.

He should have seen me by now. He's looking at the floor, still. Looking around. He jumped! He looked right, at a cupboard. Did he hear something? I saw, when he moved, he raised a foot up - he is barefoot. The other lights in the house are off. There is nobody else in the house. He is trying to look angry now, but he looks worried. Stressed and tired. He needs to sleep but he can't move. He is asking, will you help? He doesn't know who he is asking but I answer yes, I will help.

I can't help if he sees me and there are pans and plates stacked next to the kitchen window. I go to the front of the house, exit the alley. Front room window, open. Nobody in the pub across the road, nobody around. Inside, a space next to the window. No questions from now. Twelve seconds later I am inside. The room is a bedroom, the door is open. I go. Into the hall, into the living room. He doesn't see me. He is standing on the sofa, looking at the floor. He looks around my feet. I am wearing shoes. I look down and see the floor. Nothing to see, but still he looks, around and around and around. His bare feet are clenching their toes, his hands don't know where to be. I climb up on the sofa and stand next to him. I smell something. Animal, lived in, like a hamster cage. Dirty, needs cleaning. I look at his face. Still the floor, still moving his eyes. He sill doesn't see me, even now I'm right here at his side. Schizoid, tired. Bloodshot. He should sleep.

I wonder what he's seeing, and I look down. There are rats on the floor. Not one or two. At least twenty. Scurrying around and making

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noises, louder and louder, and the smell grows, more and more intense. The air around me is nothing but the smell and the sound. I am covered in it. I almost fall, but I steady myself. I grab him, I twist his neck until there is a *krakk*..

Silence. Fresh air. He lies down on the sofa, finally sleeping. I step down and walk away, out, through the front door.

II

The bus stop shrouds him, but it's too big and he's still in the open. A few shadows are on his face from the leaves on the trees above him. He is looking at his phone again. Keeps checking it again, again, again. Quick glances. He's not expecting a message. He is checking the time, clearly. Panicking about the time, almost. He seems to be a shroud of stuttered questions,

what time is it,
where is the bus,
why isn't the bus
here yet,
am I at
the
right
stop,
what
will
I
do
if
I
miss the bus,
how
much

does the train cost. I can hear the questions, they are coming out of him and can be sensed, maybe by anyone. He fidgets and fidgets and he is never still, hands always looking for answers from his

telephone or his notepad. He is far away but I know that his eyes are darting, around the numbers he sees. He processes them over and again but they never bring the answers.

“It is this time” says the phone, but that does not help.

The paper can't tell him where the bus is.

The memories that he is having, of booking his place on the bus, no ticket, just a code, the memories tell him that this is the second stop, opposite empty buildings which he glances at, knowing they will be busy soon. The buildings that fill him with a feeling or an idea. One day, maybe the feeling will be pride, maybe the idea will matter. Significance. The thought of it drags him from his panic, stops him fidgeting for a minute. But then his eye is caught, a bus passes the road adjoining the one he is on. It is not his bus, not even like it. A different colour. Notepad, phone, timetable affixed to the bus stop behind him. His eyes brush them all and find nothing that helps. Lost to panic again. Fidget. Fidget fidget. Keeps on doing it. Never stops. It is unbearable. He is getting no calmer, indeed the opposite. He is building up his tension until God Knows What Next. God Knows What Will Happen.

The bus is coming.

He hasn't seen it and he still fidgets, but as it comes into his line of vision he jumps up and scrambles for his bag, jams the notepad in, looks expectantly. The bus draws closer. Is he calmed? No. He keeps fidgeting, carries on, won't stop. Notepad brought out and checked again. And now there are other questions coming from him,

what if the number is wrong,

will

anyone

sit next to me, I hope they don't or do I,

is the stop close enough to the station, will I make it in time,

and he is still lost to panic, worries about the immediate future, never calm and never happy. He is wearing himself out, wearing his spirit and soul out.

It is no way to live.

The bus is almost there. I dart across the road. He does not see me, all he sees is the bus and everything that is to be wrong with it. The bus pulls up, slowing down, and I seize his fidgeting form. I bend him down so he can breathe, I take him to the floor, the road, as the bus passes us. I push his head forward and down. The back wheel of the bus smoothes it down into the concrete road and the fidgeting stops. He is calm and he is still. A young woman gets off the bus, walks in the opposite direction. The bus moves on and does not notice him. He lies on the floor and is peaceful. The world around him is quiet.

III

"So what do you think happens... when we die?"

"Heaven or hell."

"Yeah?"

"Definitely. I don't think, I know."

"Okay."

"Why? What about you?"

"No reason. And I'm not sure."

"Hm."

"You feel like you know for sure, then?"

"*Feel like*". I know. For sure."

"Sounds like it."

"*Like*". There is no *like*. It's certain."

"You can't *know*, though. You don't."

"I definitely do."

"You say words like that, but I don't feel it. I don't hear certainty or definitiveness from you."

"Then you're obviously not *listening*."

"Obviously? I am listening. More than you know I can."

"You don't know."

"I think it's you who doesn't know."

"Why are you here? Why are you always a *question*? Leave me alone."

"You seem alone to me."

"That's not a bad thing."

"Sometimes it isn't. But maybe if you listened to someone else, you might listen to yourself."

"I don't need to listen. I can think."

"That's not all you can do. And maybe you can get better at it."

"Who are you to say what's better? Get out of here. I don't want to talk to you."

"Well, I knew that much already."

"Then why are you here? You can't just come here to tell me I'm wrong. Get out."

"I'm not telling you you're wrong. I'm telling you to look at yourself. Recognise yourself."

"Get out."

"Okay. I'm gone."

Quiet then painful silence. He rocks around. His eyes are too hot to cry but it seems like that is what he should be doing. He is grabbing his legs... his fingers dig into himself. He stares straight ahead with those red hot eyes, burning outside and inside. Can he see himself?

No.

He is wearing himself down to nothing. He cannot be so afraid of being him. It can not work. It is not working. He needs to stop, now. Will you help me? Yes, I will help you stop.

His shoulders lurch forwards every time he doubts himself. I grab them, I throw him down. He lands on the floor, face first, limbs spread. His breath is thrown from him and he lifts his head up to catch it. *Heeeeeaaaaahhhh...* He looks around. He is still scared of himself. I step forward as he flails face down, not able to organise his limbs to raise himself from the floor. There is no way he can ever learn like this. He will never see clearly again. The words...

"too late..."

... they could be burned into him. I step forward and place my left heel on his neck. I push down, push my body weight up. I feel his

stress give beneath me. There is no more fear and no more uncertainty.

IV

Incense, a bowl of water, a candle, a bowl of salt. A circle, chalk. Two souls inside it, calm, so they would say. She reads words from paper, he reads the next ones. There are typed words and written words, words crossed out and some underlined. They go through it, they rip apart a loaf of bread. After a time, the chalk is brushed away and the bread is eaten, in chunks.

They descend stairs. He puts music on. He looks at her, looking for appreciation in her eyes. What colour are they? He can never tell.

They converse as old friends, deeply and honestly, but something else lurks. I can see guilt in him. I can see very recent memories making him feel less like being there, less like her friend. Less... worthy. What a foolish thing to feel about a friend's company. But he won't realise that, of course. Especially if he keeps waiting for her to fix it. Fix everything. She has helped before but this time she doesn't see anything wrong. Not like he does. Was something missing?

He forgot to bring something.

That is all it is. He forgot. He didn't organise himself and now he is punishing himself because he feels less worthy of what he has. FOOL. He has become melodrama and he has stepped beyond boundaries of reason. I wonder... is there a way back for him?

I watch a while. I see them play off each other, with words and ideas. Not so much movement, but sometimes. The movement is more about positioning than interaction. Platonic. Trusting. Almost defined roles...

He glances at the door, as if ready to give up. She is closer to the door, next to the table. He seems to be on the verge on panic, even though the energy of the room is offering more peace than he has ever known. What is doing this to him? Maybe it is one thing or maybe more. Maybe it is everything.

And then I see it.

It is her.

She is not the way back, but she is the barrier. He is trapped as long as he believes in her. She blocks his way back to the world where he belongs.

I sweep the leg, the head cracks off a thick wooden chair. The barrier is removed.

He stands, staring, gawping. I look at him but he does not see me. He sees nothing but her, and she is disappearing. She may as well dissolve in front of him. She is gone.

Now he sees the world. He still doesn't see me, but he senses something. A shift, a helping hand. Now, at the very least, he lives.

V

It's not 1985. That's why he doesn't want to go there. He wants to go to a place that is here, now. Why won't they understand that?

He sits, comfortable, in someone else's living room. Surrounded by friends. To his left, another one. Oh, but she is more. Not usually, but tonight. It is one of those nights, a night where logic and collectedness are abandoned, lost along the way. Tonight he needs to be WITH someone. And his eyes, and perhaps a small part of his mind, have chosen her. But, as if it were needed, a twist! She leaves soon. He cannot have her. On top of that, somebody else wants her - he thinks... she thinks? - and they will probably get her even before she is gone.

It is the most undignified of failings, and I want nothing more than to transport him from his misery through the plate glass window behind him. But I cannot do that this time. A step has been taken and we must now work as a unit, even with him unconscious of me. This meandering path has brought us together - I have removed him from his uncomfortable times and he has been better for it. Now, though, it is time for him to be in control. He cannot actively remove himself or the game is over. He must remove others

to help himself. I can only lead him to the door - he must walk through. Tonight, with its pathetic silent outpouring of fictional emotion, will be an excellent place to start. They are getting up to leave. He follows.

Hours later, he and she are alone, walking. The words they exchange are awkward... 'miss you'... 'back soon'... 'in touch'... nothing touches on what either of them is really thinking about. I find it almost unbearable to watch. He must take action. He MUST.

They pass an alley with a broken metal frame abandoned near their end. She lives next to here. They stop and face each other to embrace and say their parting pieces. He glanced at the metal - I saw him. But no. He will not take action.

I will have to do it for him, one more time. I pick up a metal bar. I swing. I hit nothing. She is gone, inside, and he is walking away, storming to himself. I chase him, I move in front of him. He does not see me, he moves past me. I dart in front of him and he still does not know I'm here. He keeps walking. I step in front of him again. I grab his shoulders. I look into his eyes, my face inches from his. I scream.

WHY CAN'T YOU SEE ME?

He stares ahead for a second, blank, unseeing, then he shakes me off and keeps walking.

Of course, I must follow.

VI

"How can you SAY that?! How can you possibly think those things are the same?

...

I don't understand how you can think that. I just don't. That's like... imagine bringing someone you know and trust into your house. Imagine opening the front door for them, welcoming them in... now imagine someone you don't know, or someone you're

scared of, breaking down the door when you want to be alone... god, you're making me sound VULGAR. I HATE you."

I am watching him, sitting at his computer screen. He has read words, a quote, and they have angered him.

"They are DIFFERENT THINGS. UNDERSTAND THAT. How can you live in the world and not understand that?!"

He is shouting now. Shouting at someone who is not there, and ignoring someone who is. I cannot blame him - I understand now why he does not see me.

"WHAT HAS BROUGHT YOU TO A PLACE IN YOUR MIND WHERE YOU CAN THINK LIKE THAT?!"

He thinks I am inside him.

"I just... I just don't get it."

He does not know I can affect the outside.

"I don't get YOU."

It is not his fault. It is difficult to see, especially as I'm moving in a pattern outside his concept of time. It may not seem like the best way but it is, in reality, the only way. I must deal with these things as they come to him, and that does not always take place in the present.

"..."

He stares, silent, fuming. He will not remove his eyes from that which has enraged them. I walk over to him. I look at the screen and I see the words. More - I see the image he sees behind them. There is nothing there but text on background, two basic colours, but I see the connotations, I see the images. I see meaning, as he does. I reach out an arm to the screen. His eyes dart down to it. He jumps, then stares, uncomprehending. He watches as I reach into the screen, through the filter of his mind, and I pull out a vague image of a man, besuited, huffy, angry and repulsive. I drag the man to his feet on the floor of the room, and I ball my fist up and swing it into his face. He turns, a tooth flies. I swing with the other fist, to the gut this time. He buckles, slumps down to his knees, facing away. I kick the back of his head, I stamp on limbs, on spine. I deliver blow after blow to the head, the mouth where the words must have come from.

I keep doing this until he is gone. Not still, not dead. Gone. Vanished. Unexisting. There is no him, he is not. It seems he never was.

Eyes watch me from next to the computer. Eyes see me. He gets up and we stand face-to-face. He cannot solve his problems without me. He knows this now. He never realised I wasn't there - that was the problem. He assumed I was there and could not understand why he could not solve what I am capable of solving. Now he has recognised me as separate. Now we must move forward from this.

He relaxes. I step forward into him. We are a whole, capable.

VII

We are standing on the sofa in the living room. We are throwing stones at them all as they run around on the floor. He is happy. Now we live together in the real world, we can see everything purely as it is. People may look from outside and see something that makes them uncomfortable, but that's because they are separate from me, as he was. With our vision combined we can discern between when a problem must be solved, and when a problem must be removed. That is a strength, not a fault. We are better tailored for this world than anyone. Any one. We are more. Safer.

Of course, there will be misunderstanding. There will be misinterpretations of our intentions. But that is not to be worried about. The consequences of such things take place in linear time... time we are beyond...

We exist outside... and we kill the rats that run through time.

