

“Rats”

by Liz Chamberlin

We ate the second to the last of the rats yesterday, the one we'd been trying to plump up on cocksucking cockroaches all summer long with only marginal success. My God, how I hated those cocksuckers. How I hated them with every fiber of my being, how I longed to smash their shiny black carapaces clear into oblivion, how I longed to rip their quivering antennae from their very cocksucking bodies.

If only I weren't so repulsed by their disgustingness I could hardly bear to look at them.

After the skinning and the roasting, we'd each gotten a few greasy bites of cocksucker-fed rat, all the crew huddling around the small compound fire. The meat was hot enough to burn our fingertips. I felt almost wonderful for about three minutes, and then everything was back to normal. My skin crawled, my insides churned in their own acids. My fingertips were raw.

And then of course we were down to the one final rat, twitching all by his lonesome in the crate. His singleness, although expected, created in the crew a new, rarefied kind of anxiety. At some point our crate rats had stopped breeding; they had stopped making us more rats, and last winter we had given up with resigned shrugs. We had given up by simply continuing to eat.

Still, we hungered.

So this last rat, we knew, we had to fatten. We had to make him large.

The cocksuckers lifted their antennae as if sniffing the air, and who knows, with all the free radicals careening around these days, it was hard to say just what they sensed. Maybe they read his little rat mind. Maybe they read ours. They certainly seemed to strut their disgusting cocksuckery stuff.

In truth we resented the cocksuckers. For they would inherit our mess.

And also, there was the other truth.

We wanted the rat to eat the cocksuckers so we wouldn't have to.

The morning after the roasting, when our crew went out scavenging, I was left behind, assigned to the rat. Guard duty.

“But,” I protested. “I'll be all alone.”

The Kid stiffened.

“Just stay here and ... watch the rat,” Langston said.

At first I stayed on my side of the room, minding my own business, trying hard not to think about what the rat was thinking in the crate. How he'd watched his tribe dwindle all these months. Did he smell his tribe mate's flesh on our breath, their scent emanating from our pores?

In the end the pull of that damned rat proved tractor beamish. I drifted towards the crate and cracked the lid. There he was, cowering. Snout buried in his paws. The rat shrank when I reached into the crate, mindful of the uneaten cocksuckers. His quivering whiskers stirred something deep inside me, something I hadn't felt since before the apocalypse. Because when I saw that poor beast quaking in his bones, I swear I felt the swoon of maternal love.

My babies. I remembered them wrapped in soft blue blankets, clouds floating in the blue, their milky breath, their fuzzy skulls. I remembered their perfect weight in my arms, as if they were the only things in the universe my arms had been built to hold.

The rat gazed up into my eyes, as if he wanted to reach for my face.

If he had happened to have evolved arms instead of those stubby limbs, I mean.

I scooped up the small warm being, noted the frantic throbbing of his chest, and clutched him to my cheek. When I pulled him back to have a look at him, his left side was damp with my tears, his fur askew and spiked. He was bedraggled.

“*You*,” I said.

It was difficult to get anything done with the rat in my hands; I couldn't sweep or harvest the oddly pale grass we sometimes used for soup. In frustration I finally set him upon my shoulder. Back in the Real World I'd once seen a punk-rock kid riding his bicycle with a pet rat on his shoulder, the rat's wiry tail draping his chest, whiskers quivering. Of course that rat had been much plumper than ours. It was fat on our excess and magnanimity.

Our rat was livestock, not an accessory, and I fully expected him to bolt. I prepared, hands in mid-air, to catch him.

But the rat didn't bolt. Instead he nuzzled my neck while I hummed, something soft and mindless, something that my babies had enjoyed in the Real World when mothers still sang, and birds too.

Before the scavengers returned, I returned the rat to the crate. As I tucked him into the corner furthest from the dark herd of cocksuckers, he looked right at me, a question in his pink eyes.

“Yes,” I answered, not without sadness.

I was aware of how few nucleotides separated that rat from myself, how minute the differences in biochemistry that resulted in the shape my self took instead of the shape of the rat. I was aware that we were connected, by some distant ancestor who had given rise to us both. Now that ancestor was gone, and so soon would we be.

The rat and me.

Langston returned with the crew that evening, all six including the Kid.

“Eat,” Langston said gruffly, tossing something in my lap. He dropped beside me, heavy with exhaustion. The Kid went straight to the far side of the room, where he would play quiet games with the dirty stuffed animals, and then sleep in a pile of tangled small bodies, one real, most not. Like post-apocalyptic puppies.

More and more the Kid preferred to be far from me. I couldn’t say that I blamed him.

In my lap was a small, lumpy bundle. Glancing at Langston, I unwrapped it. Inside was a small pile of raisins and half of a Real World PowerBar. Banana.

I didn’t speak. Langston said, and I could hear the defensiveness in his voice, “The Kid was hungry. I gave him an extra ration. That’s what you’d want ... right?”

Eyes welling, I tried to swallow. “I’m not sure what I want,” I said.

As I grew weaker I set up a chair in the doorway. It felt nice. A little free-radical-laden wind on my cheeks, the mutagenic sun warming my bones. The rat yawned, turned circles and settled into a little donut on my thighs.

“What do you think?” I asked.

He twitched.

“I thought so,” I said. “It’s good to get out.”

We passed most of our days on that chair as we rested in the sun together, humming.

There was a pile of hair—human hair—in one corner of the compound, fresh and thick. There had been bugs, and itching, and then a most unceremonious shaving. I could feel the rat eyeing that hair pile. I could almost smell his yearning.

“You’d love nothing more than to build a nest, wouldn’t you?” I asked the rat, reaching to take him in both hands so we could talk face to face, like civilized beings. Briefly, in one of the oldest and most currently endangered symbols of cross-species mammalian communication, we bumped noses.

“I wish I’d known you in my real life,” I told the rat. “But I suppose we wouldn’t have had the same relationship.”

I could feel tiny puffs of his breath on my skin, like perfect Real World spring weather, in miniature.

Each afternoon the scavengers returned and checked on the progress of the rat. They confirmed that he was not large.

“Why is he not eating?” they asked each other.

“What will we do?” they said, as if they had options.

Nancy came up behind Langston and placed her wiry fingers on the small of his back, wrinkling his filthy shirt in her fist. Clutching him there, she leaned close and whispered in his ear.

I lay limp on my mat.

The Kid looked up from his lonely game, saw that scavenger touch his father, her bald head scarred from the dull razor but her tough beauty undeniable. Without his own hair, the Kid looked like an overgrown baby.

My baby, my real *baby*, had lasted but six weeks after the bombs had blown, when we were still inundated daily with those oddly-sweet chemical rains. I’d watched him leave as he lay in my arms. Langston and the Kid, such a very small child then, had orbited us as the baby died, circling ever further away. I couldn’t blame them, but still, you know.

I did.

Langston’s forehead dropped until it came to a rest against Nancy’s, her hands lighting upon his sunken cheeks. The Kid grinned, and I saw he’d lost his two front teeth.

“You look like a pumpkin!” I gasped, and then I cried.

Drat. They caught me with the rat.

The rat was still squeaking in his crate when they crept towards me, glaring. My wrist was raw where the cord bound me to my chair.

“I’m sorry!” I cried.

“No harm done,” Langston replied. “Yet.”

I stared at him. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

Flanked by the others, and Nancy on his right, Langston offered a red plastic cup.

“Eat,” Langston said, meeting my eyes. “You’re hungry, yes?”

Inside were the bodies, black, and mercifully still.

“Cocksuckers,” I spat.

The end of course had come slowly. He’d stopped nursing, pulling from my nipple and letting my milk run from his mouth, a puzzled look on his face. His fuzzy white-blond hair had all fallen out, leaving soft trails like piles of whiskers. He stopped babbling, stopped cooing. His skin clung more tightly to his bones, making him appear old, and wise. Which he was, looking back, to leave so soon when people were still possessed of their dignity and grace. He stopped wiggling while I held him, and just lay still, staring hard into my eyes. He stopped urinating and I stripped him bare, and tucked us both cocooned inside a shawl, skin to skin. Just his face peeked out of our private world, so that we could watch each other until the end. He stopped crying, his eyes too dry for tears. He watched me, not blinking. I watched right back.

It was my last act of maternal bravery and I performed it with all of my might.

Finally he sucked in one last long, jagged breath.

He just stopped.

I felt the end as surely as I’d have felt my body slam into a wall. And what comes after the end? Nothing, or at least nothing real.

When the crew went out the next morning I shouldn’t have been surprised when they barricaded the door, sealing me inside, but still I was. I gnawed at the cord, tasting blood, until I was free, but I didn’t even try for the door.

In the end, the world being what it was, I could dream of an exit, but not of escape.

I opened the lid. The rat looked up.

“Trapped,” I told him. But because he wiser than me, and more of an old hand at this game, I wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t already know.

We had that day, the rat and I. It was hell; it was a gift.

That night, Langston knocked the poor little skull with a rock.

He looked relieved as the rock was falling, I tell you. I'll be relieved to be rid of these cocksuckers too. If I join the rat, in whatever dream comes after this one, I hope he'll bump noses with me as friends.

They roasted his tiny limp body on a little spit, Langston and our remaining child huddled around the pathetic flickering flame with the others, visibly salivating. Of course I had to turn away. Silent mouth open with the spit sticking out, stripped of the skin that had held his rat shape. Stripped of everything that had made him *him*.

It was nothing; but a nothing I simply couldn't bear.