

Chapter 6

no inner/no outer

FOLLOWING THE VISITS of the raccoon, a series of my mammal compatriots made themselves known in my life, offering occasion for risk and healing. Some of them appeared in the most unexpected places.

After months of deposits on the stove top, in the cast-iron skillet, even in the salad bowl, I finally admitted that there might be a mouse. Weeks followed of experiments with mouse-friendly deterrents—high-pitched beepers and Have-a-Heart traps—with no appearance of the culprit.

One early morning when I swooped through the kitchen preparing for my walk, I noticed that the refrigerator door was ajar. Maybe the lettuce bin had been left open the night before or a hastily shelved casserole was sticking out. Hurrying past, I clicked the door shut.

When I came back, I hurried around the house preparing for the day. I threw open the door of the fridge. There, amid the tortillas, something twitched. Crying out, I leaped back. From the shelf, a furry rodent regarded me with dark, beady eyes. Its long, spiny tail quivered. I slammed the door closed.

I ran to Patrick in the bathroom. “Patrick! The mouse is in the refrigerator!” I could see our two reflections in the bath-

room mirror, Patrick's, confused behind the mask of shaving cream, and mine, pale.

Awakened by my initial shout, Katy sped out of her room. "Let's go see it!" she cried, and then flung open the door of the refrigerator to reveal our visitor.

We all crowded around. I flinched at its hard, trapped look as it seemed to challenge us from behind the yogurt. "Yup, it's the mouse all right!" said Patrick. And Katy (gloating, with the obvious relish of a ten-year-old), "It's not a mouse. I've known all along. It's a rat!"

Bounding backward in anticipation of I don't know what, I herded Katy into her room and once again hurried the door of the fridge closed. Patrick blew me a kiss as he hurried out the front door for a meeting with a panel of judges. "Just leave it there and forget about it. I'll deal with it when I get back tonight." Over my shouts of alarm, he reassured me, "Don't worry. When I come home, our mouse will be either totally frozen or fat, happy, and very slow."

Despite the generous offer (in true Patrick-style, he did manage to get me laughing), I was unwilling to carry on with this menace in my kitchen. I got on the phone. One answering machine directed me to the next, from the animal shelter to the health department. On the twenty-four-hour police hotline, I finally got an actual voice. To my plea "There's a rodent in my refrigerator!" an officer calmly directed me to vector control. Vector control turned out to be the county agency that deals with "vectors"—organisms that carry and transmit disease-causing microorganisms.

I finally reached this agency when they opened at 8:00 A.M., but the inspectors were all in the field monitoring an emergency sewer leak. By my third call, I had worked myself up to a fever pitch, all risk-averse tendencies mobilized: "'No' is not acceptable. I have a ten-year-old and a dog, and there's a mouse in the fridge. This is an emergency!"

"Yes, ma'am," returned the bored voice of a receptionist, maybe reading a magazine or stringing her coffee. "We'll send someone out soon as they get in."

By this time, I barely cared what they did with the mouse. No matter how, just get rid of it! As I anxiously awaited vector control, I conjured up pictures of the inspectors: two cold gray men (gray uniforms, gray potbelies, doughy gray faces, with gray pistols in their holsters). I would hear their great gray boots banging up the wooden stairs, a pitiless knocking on the front door.

But at 9:00 A.M. sharp I was startled by a single pristine ring. In the doorway stood a statuesque young woman—over six feet with long, dyed-blond hair, arched brows, painted eyes, cheeks bright with blush. I was taken aback. But here she was. She was indeed in uniform: a blue shirt with a badge, navy blue pants. I noticed a few insignia of her trade: dangling from her belt, a set of keys (galler-size); in a holster, a formidable flashlight; and swinging from one hand, a large wire cage. "I'm from vector control," she introduced herself, holding out her other hand—all rings, with long, maroon-polished nails.

"You're not who I expected," said I.

She swished her hair and lowered her eyes, surprising me now in a new way, with the girlish purity of her laugh.

"You must get calls like this all the time." I tried to make friendly conversation as I pointed the way to the refrigerator.

"Well, I wouldn't say that exactly. Most often they're behind the stove or under the sink or even in the toilet." Her bracelets jangled.

"I'm in quite a flap," I admitted.

She looked right at me (did she stroke my arm?) and said, "Of course," without any sign of judgment. I was unnerved by her empathy.

She pulled on thick vinyl gloves. From the living room, I held Katy and Cleo at bay. Through the doorway to the kitchen, I

could see our inspector kneeling by the refrigerator, holding up the cage. At first she couldn't locate the mouse. She was following a trail: gnawed tortillas, crumpled Snickers' wrappers, a half-chewed apple.

"He's really scared." She seemed to know. "It's almost impossible to catch them when they're frightened." That gave me a turn. Something about the concern in her voice, the tremble for the mouse.

Suddenly I heard a coo. "Ohhhhhhh, there you are. Just look at you. You're soooooo cute."

Rounding the corner, I edged up to watch the chase—from the vegetable bin to the dairy shelf, down to the shelf of pancake mixes, flour, and sugars. "You can tell from the length of the tail," she commented. "It is a rat." Appalled, I watched the scaly, sparsely-haired tail disappear inside the drawer where we keep our eggs.

The thought that it was indeed a rat exacerbated my protective panic—images of the bubonic plague, of the eyeball-eating rats from Orwell's *1984*, of red-eyed rats pouncing into babies' cribs.

Our four walls, even the confines of the refrigerator, hadn't kept this rat out. I ordered Katy out of the kitchen and into her room and pushed Cleo, barking, behind her. Meanwhile, our lady inspector borrowed a bath towel and suggested that if she caught it in the towel, she would release it in our yard. "No, please!" I pleaded. "Nowhere near our home!"

At the same time, or some other layer of response, I kept finding myself touched by this lady from vector control as she continued a nuanced conversation with the rat. I could hear her cajoling him, a cadence in her voice that felt wholly genuine.

When the rat was (to my relief) ensconced in the cage, Katy and I joined our savior in the kitchen. I took a cautious look at the rat. Lively behind the bars, it had a hearty (and, I admitted to myself, ingenious) look. Its whiskers and pink nose quivered;

its coat was full and soft. The cage swayed back and forth as it leapt around. "It's sweet, Mom," commented Katy. "Why were you so afraid?"

"He's a black rat," our inspector explained. "And I'm quite sure he's a he. He couldn't be more than four months old." So young. Once again, taken short, I took a keen look at the rat. I stared, mesmerized by this robust young rodent in his swinging cage. "Black rats are sometimes called roof rats," our inspector continued. "They're excellent climbers. They live in vines, like ivy or jasmine, or in the walls of a house. They like to nest in the attic or in the roof." Nervously, I eyed the stairway to our attic bedroom.

Despite the youth and apparent health of the rat, our rat lady suggested a complete cleaning of our kitchen. So after she departed with the cage (to take the rat, she said, to the mountains), I donned rubber gloves myself. Because of the health hazards, she recommended that I use strong bleach and wear a mask.

Even as she walked out the front door, in my mind, our rat aged and grew in size and virulence. The rat seemed to carry all that scared me, anything that might creep in uninvited to threaten health and peace of mind. Unlike the cancer that also took me unawares, this rat—furry and hungry—was visible and its dangers could possibly be eradicated. Propelled by protectiveness, I emptied the refrigerator; every last item—ketchup, marmalade, plastic containers of leftover soups—was hauled off to the street and into the garbage.

OVER THE FOLLOWING WEEKS, imagining the disease-causing microorganisms now inside the house and infiltrating our bodies, I ran from attic to basement, patching all cracks and holes in the walls that protected our home from the street. I bleached and scoured all crevices and corners. But, to my

distress, I noticed that my mind was still permeated with rat. I found myself searching the Internet to learn about the rat's destructive powers: ravaging warehouses for grain, causing floods by tunneling through dams, starting fires by gnawing on matches, and carrying diseases such as typhus and spotted fever, and (yes) the plague.

Inside the house, I saw my continued skittishness triggered when I opened a drawer or a closet. And outside in our yard, I was wary. I hesitated as I passed the tangled potato vine, as I raised the top of the trash can or the broken lid of our compost bin. Outside on the street, I sidestepped trash-littered gutters and storm drains. As the bells for a train began to toll, I vaulted over stagnant pools between broken railway ties and ran past an open manhole releasing steam from beneath the street.

But that was not all. It started with Cleo. At dinner, I felt her nuzzling me from under the kitchen table; she looked up into my face and I back into hers. Hopfully eyeing my plate, she sniffed. There was something unnervingly familiar. Her long face, her quivering whiskers and wet nose, the dark glow of her eyes took on a disturbingly ratlike cast. I shook myself.

A few days later, it happened with a human. I was sitting in a meeting. Right in the midst of a conflict, I looked at a friend by my side, his cheeks sucked in with worry, his dark eyes scared, a hint of the trapped look I now knew. The rat.

This pattern continued with a fellow parent on the soccer field, a merchant in a store. Then, late in the night, in bed with Patrick, it happened again. We were sleeping peacefully, his buttocks resting in the curve of my belly, my knees tucked into the backs of his, my arm wrapped around his chest. With my open palm, I caressed the hair on his chest. I felt it as fur.

One evening, standing at the refrigerator, I combed the shelves, seeking the perfect snack to quell a roving hunger. Unnerved, I saw the rat in myself. The next day, I caught myself in a fit of anger about to take a ratlike pounce. As rats began to

seep into my dreams, swimming through twilight sewers, I decided it was time (maybe a little past time) to reflect on the rat "image." Somewhere in the circling of rat thoughts, I remembered hearing the writer Andrew Harvey talk about a temple in India where rats are worshiped. I wondered, could this image be redeemed?

After a day on the Internet, I found the Rat Temple, north of Rajasthan, in India. Here people pray to the rats and a goddess who, according to one legend, had arranged to have children dying from a plague reincarnated as rats. To this day, barefoot supplicants enter the temple to honor the twenty thousand "rat children," to feed them grain and milk, to protect them, to bless them and receive their blessing.

THREE WEEKS AFTER HER INITIAL VISIT, the rat lady came back to help us rat-proof our house and yard. She arrived calm and cheerful. When I questioned her about it again, she assured me that she had indeed taken our rat to the mountains.

But I wanted to know more. "How do you think he got inside our house?" I asked her uneasily.

"Rats travel through the sewers, in and along the pipes, electrical cables and wires," she explained. "Someone in your neighborhood may have done a spring cleaning, neatened up a woodpile or compost heap, trimmed back the ivy. And the rat, seeking a new home, found a secret channel into yours." Chilled, I projected future invasions. At the same time, as I listened, I found her tone unexpectedly kind, even soothing—somehow attuned to the pain and needs of the rat.

Continuing her free lessons in epidemiology, our lady inspector told me about the migrations of rats all over the planet. Some black rats are known as ship rats. These stowaways came from Southeast Asia to Europe many centuries ago, then voyaged to Central and South America, while others traveled to Jamestown

with the early colonists and spread across the North American continent. As she spoke, I shuddered at the specter. But there was something else: an amazement at the fertility, at the extent and creativity of these migrations, crisscrossing the planet inside and out through its most intimate channels.

On the advice of our kind inspector, we sealed the holes around our pipes and trimmed back the jasmine. But it felt impossible to erase the image of the rat on the move, stealing into our house, bringing with him the microorganisms of the street. Like his cousins who travel the sewers into toilets, our rat entered where orifices were open—into the kitchen where we eat. Just remembering this, my throat continued to tighten. On some visceral level, I now knew that the cozy enclave of the home, the sanctuary of the body, cannot be separated from the electrical cables, the water pipes, the sewer tunnels, the veins and arteries of the street. I saw that the barriers I counted on to help me feel safe, barriers between outside on the street and inside the house—or even inside the body—barely exist.

AT THE CLOSE of her second visit, the lady from vector control had left me to the task of cleaning up the nest behind the stove—urine-desecrated, molded out of scraps of trash, permeated by microorganisms of the street. Just before she went out the door, she'd turned back with her disarming smile. "I know it's really scary, but you can do it." I took it as a dare. Often, in the coming years as I have explored the streets of my neighborhood, I have remembered the rat lady, challenging me to risk: bless what seems to be the menace, all that is dark and furious, fury or uncontrollable from which I am inseparable—outside-in and inside-out.