

THE RAT KING

Every Thursday, under the starry moonlight in the cold of winter, a rat visited my window. It was always the same rat, a pudgy white one with brown spots flecked around his matted fur, and fat cheeks stuffed with crushed peanuts falling out from its pink mouth. It'd stare at me, unafraid, sharing with me our curiosity of the other. It captivated me, this rat, with its long slender tail moving with an elegance and eloquence like that of a falling cherry blossom leaf, floating, slowly, from the strewn branches above, into a dark bed of wet dead leaves full of earthworms, beetles, streams of fungus and roots that speak with another.

This rat, I believed, could speak with nature. It held such a beauty compared to its city siblings in Baltimore. It sat there behind the windowpane covered in fingerprints, dust, and my breathing vapor, twirling its mouth with each chew, its two tall front teeth yellow and black. I envied its perceivable satisfaction of the self. I wanted to know its secret to happiness, its acceptance of the world in its eating of stray peanut shells.

“I know you can speak,” I said to it, its black eyes reflective.

I stared into them, those two black fishbowls like partnered nebulas, and saw myself. It probably thought I was the ugliest of the humans, small, short, chubby, my brown skin covered in black body hair, my legs patchy and unshaved, my arms a field of dark wheat idle in my quiet living room. I wondered what it thought of the peach fuzz over my lips.

Such an ugly woman, it probably thought.

“I wish I were as beautiful as you, Mr. Rat,” I told it, its gender a mystery to me, but it didn't matter.

It held such a reverence over me. It held no care, no judgment whatsoever over its surroundings. Here this rat was, sitting over the small flowerbed perched before my window, dead roses and orchids, crushed and mottled and brittle from the freezing air, deflating its cheeks with the longest patience I had ever witnessed, bits of peanut shells falling onto the dead flora, watching a nobody like me.

“Just say anything, one word, something, please,” I said, mesmerized.

It could speak to anything, I told myself. It chose who deserves to hear its words. The trees likely adored it, sending messages to each other about this mystical rat that chose them to speak to. Its voice probably sounded like molasses mixed with amber, a Southern drawl of sorts from the swamps of the Savannah. It once spoke to the gators of the Florida swamps, asking them how they can stand such a wet heat full of beady-eyed mosquitoes and insects, dancing alongside the water snakes moving through the heavy water the creatures lived in.

I imagined it hitching a ride onto an old rusted train that heaved against every rail it rode over, chugging along through miles of forestry and small towns, listening to other stowaways, circus people, maybe, watching the performances of jesters in bell-jingling velvet hats splayed outwards like a blossoming crimson flower, humiliating the sweet giant elephants with its small size as it roamed the rows of humans dropping peanut shells and popcorns and chocolates for it to consume.

“Such a life you’ve lived,” I tell it, its mouth empty.

It stopped chewing. The rat gnawed on its arm, relieving an itch, shook its head, stared once more, then jumped off the perch into the dead of night, as it did, every winter Thursday.

The city began to warm in the coming spring, and the cherry blossom trees shared their fragrance with us, opening their five-petal flowers and exposing their purple core, the soft

tendrils exuding a sweet smell of fleeting winter and the coming summer heat. I lay a handful of whole peanuts over the perched flower bed the first Thursday of spring and waited for my friend to visit me. As the sun drew beneath the cobblestone streets to sleep for the night I waited. The abyss of the night drew over me, starless, the clouded sky meek without its moon, the streetlights providing an artificial semblance of its lunar warmth. I stared out the window, the fingerprints, scum, and dirt all wiped off, the glass clean and transparent. I watched people walk past my window, laughing, talking.

“I can’t believe she’s dead,” I heard a disembodied voice say outside.

The distant footsteps grew louder, closer, and the conversation became clearer.

“Just thought she had more time,” one said, their voice soft and trembling.

They moved within the frame, and I saw a dark-skinned lady with her hair wrapped in a floral head scarf wearing cherry-red boots and her companion, a short, balding man with silver hair and a handlebar mustache complementing his pale skin.

“Maybe they’ll turn her into a tree,” the man said, and they were out of frame once again.

Their footsteps grew quiet. “That...”

Their voices became a blur, and the peanuts continued to rest on the flowerbed, unmoving, untouched, and I cried. I sobbed, my shoulders shaking and breathing unsteady, and I felt the snot drip down over my lips and into the moving crevice that was my mouth. It tasted like mucus. I grabbed some peanuts hidden in my gray university hoodie and munched. It was saltless, and globs of my snot mixed into the saliva. I studied the hairs on my legs. They weren’t so bad, I thought. The rat was covered in fur. It’s still beautiful. I walked to my front door, put on the black slippers I bought for a few dollars from the nearby discount store, and stepped out. The cool air rode past my bare legs, the boxer briefs providing little warmth against the breeze. I

walked down the sidewalk, beneath the buzzing streetlights, past the red brick homes, and down an alleyway where icicle lights were strewn around trees and over cobblestone streets, like dripping stars. There was a young cherry blossom before one of the houses, a vacant row home with boarded up windows, a sad, old gray brick covering its visage. I walked over to it, the pink, cherry petals dancing in the wind, and I saw something white lying beside its base, over its colony of roots. The thing was white, covered in fur, with orange specks all over its matted fur, and its eyes were closed. Its body was still, nothing rising to express its breathing, and its mouth hung open, empty. The tail lay over the soil, unmoving.

“No,” I said in my trembling voice. “No, no, no.”

I held my face in my hands, pressing against the skin, moving my flesh around, distorting my mouth and my brows and my nose. I pounded my fist against the side of my head, angry, sad, lonely. It was my friend. I looked above, staring at the moving branches of the young cherry blossom.

“I’m going to bury him here, okay?” I said to it.

I did not wait for it to answer. I cupped my hands and dug into the earth with my fingers. The soil was unnaturally soft, wet and new, and I squeezed the dirt in my palms as it fell to the side of the rat’s grave. I pulled the soil out, feeling the bugs crawl around my nails and wrists. I could see the worms wriggling back deeper into the soil, annoyed by the exposure. I felt the hardness of the tree’s roots and stopped there. The rat would love being buried beside a root. I grabbed all of the peanuts in my pocket and sprinkled a few within the grave. I placed my palm beneath the rat’s head, a beautiful, weightless extension of his heart, gently caressing the small thing, and used the other to hold his body. I lowered him, slowly, until his body rested over the bed of peanuts. I thought of gold coins over the eyes of the dead and cracked open a peanut shell,

excavating the peanuts within. I split apart one and placed each half over his eyes, a love like that of a mother and her dead son. I covered it with soil until the body was entirely submerged into its grave and placed the remaining peanuts over it with delicate composure. My hands were black with soil, the granules of dirt tickling the flesh beneath my nails.

“I hope your soul grows into this tree, my friend,” I said to the grave, my hands together in prayer. “Just remember to visit me, please, through the other trees.”

I walked back home, lines of dried salty tears marking my cheeks, the snot wiped onto my sleeve, and washed my hands. The night was still as I slept. I didn't dream, I think, of anything except the rat staring at me. It spoke to me in this dream with its southern drawl.

“You don't gotta worry no more, sugar,” it said with its deep molasses voice. “It's gonna be all right now.”