

RATAZOUILLE



"Our natures do pursue,
Like rats that ravine down their proper food,
A thirsty evil, and when we drink,
We thirst again."
Shakespeare

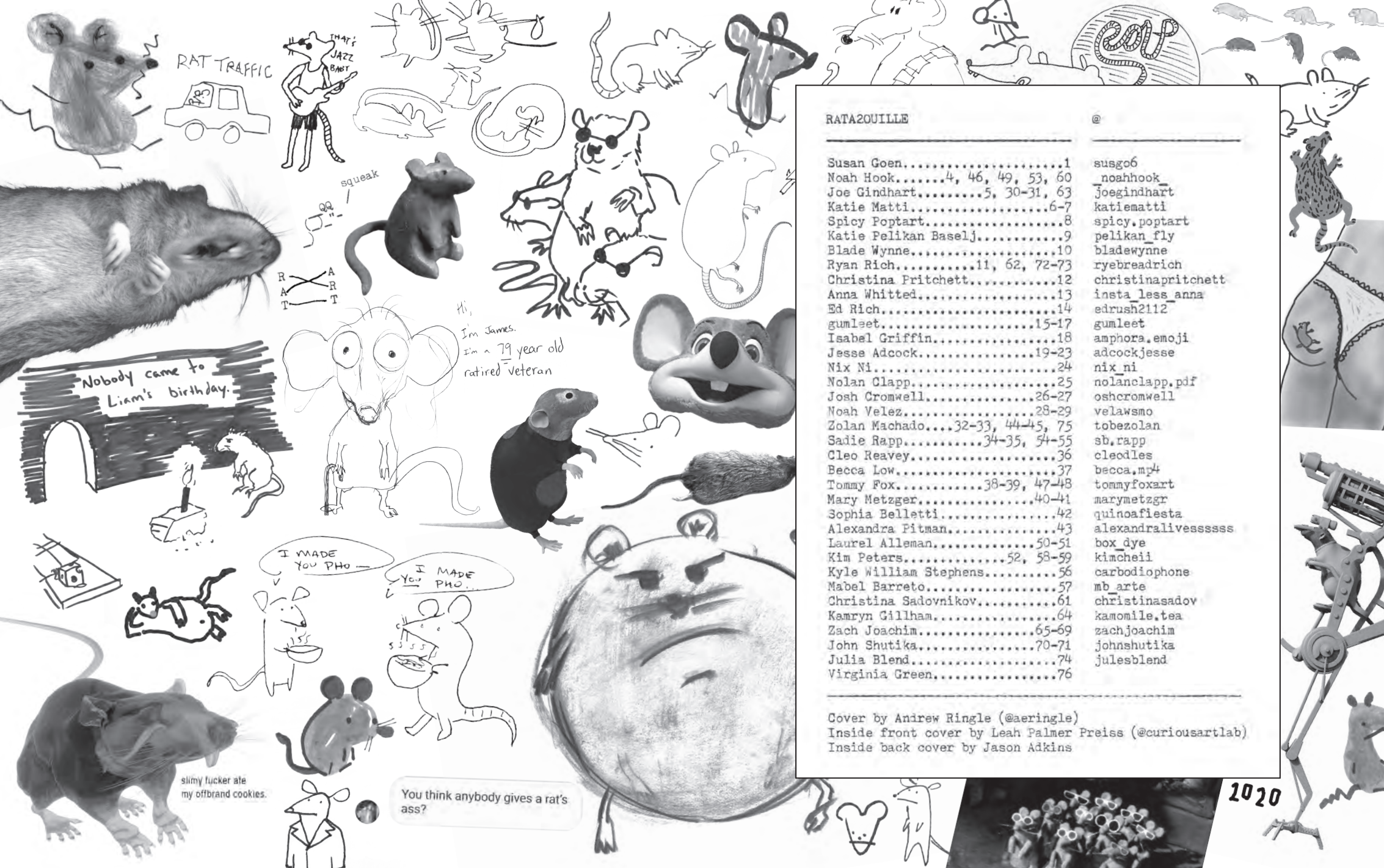
his food, by moving his jaws incessantly up and down, ten times faster than the jaws of a rabbit. When a rat jumps he jumps like a dog. A rat generally tastes his food with his tongue, in eating. When sleeping, the rat coils himself up, tucking his head and hind legs down between his hind legs; his tail is curled up round the middle of his body, the part of him projecting but his two delicate ears, which are constantly raised for catching the least sound.

364. Why may the black rat be found in a low wire snare fixed on the ground, at night, because the black rat is a nocturnal animal, chiefly in the evening, and was once seen at a certain time, and was once seen at a certain time, and was once seen at a certain time.



Rattus rattus

At night
They come out
Searching the dusky gray corners of the city
For treasures-
A crusted dog nugget,
Slick, salty crumbs tucked in the corners of a bag,
A sugary smear stuck to a white cardboard tray.
Hiding behind metal cans,
Skittering away when approached,
Frozen when caught in the light from headlamps,
Their red eyes shining back clear.



RAT TRAFFIC

THAT'S
JAZZ
BABY

squeak

R
A
T
X
A
R
T
T

Hi,
I'm James.
I'm a 79 year old
retired Veteran

Nobody came to
Liam's birthday.

I MADE
YOU PHO —

I MADE
YOU PHO.

slimy fucker ate
my offbrand cookies.

You think anybody gives a rat's
ass?

RATA2OUILLE

@

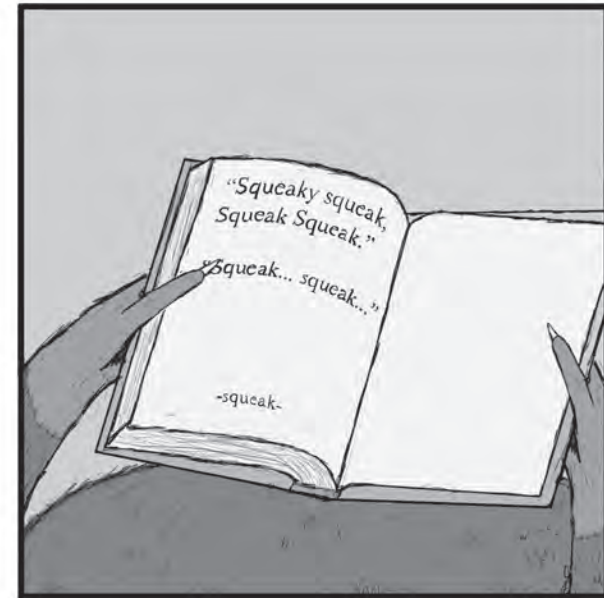
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Blade Wynne.....	10	bladewynne
Ryan Rich.....	11, 62, 72-73	ryebreadrich
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Cover by Andrew Ringle (@aeringle)
Inside front cover by Leah Palmer Preiss (@curiousartlab)
Inside back cover by Jason Adkins



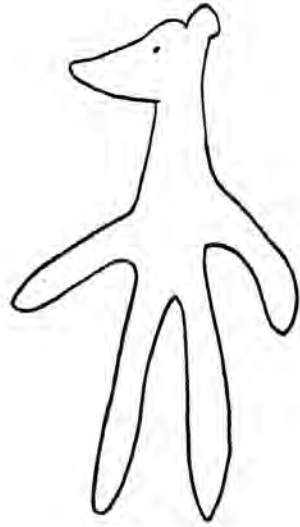
Curated & designed by Ryan Rich
in the Year of the Rat 2020

No. ___ of 200

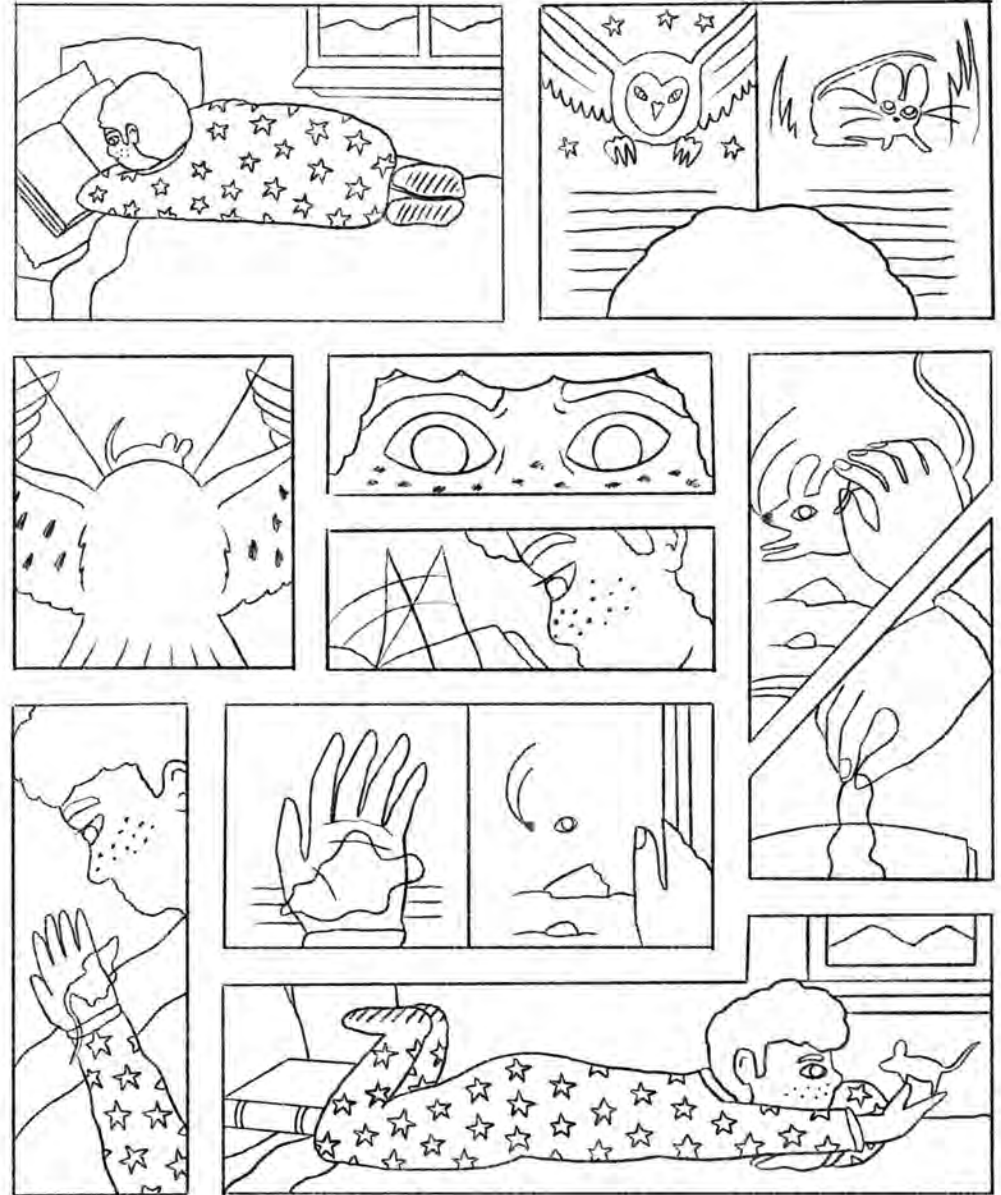


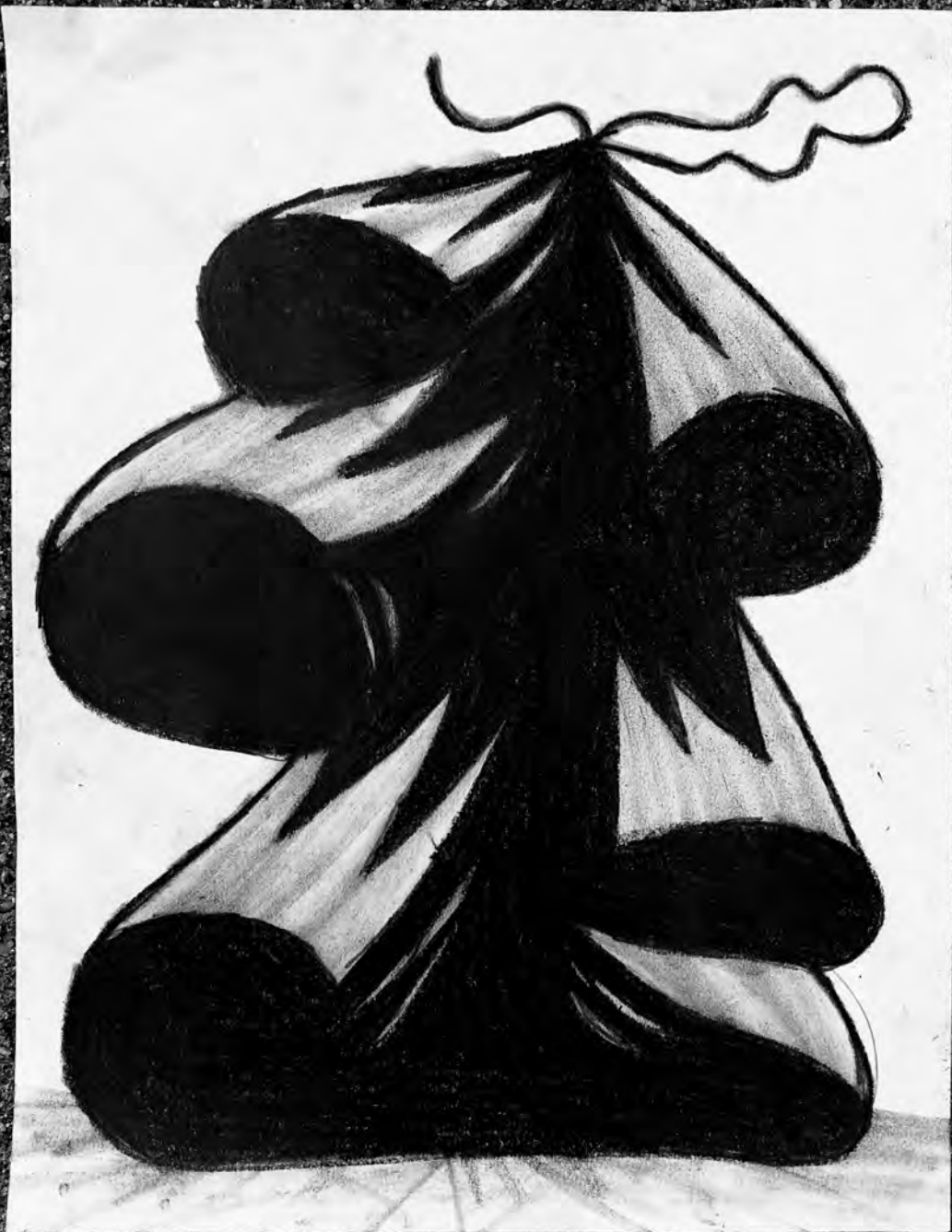
Release the *Sugar!*

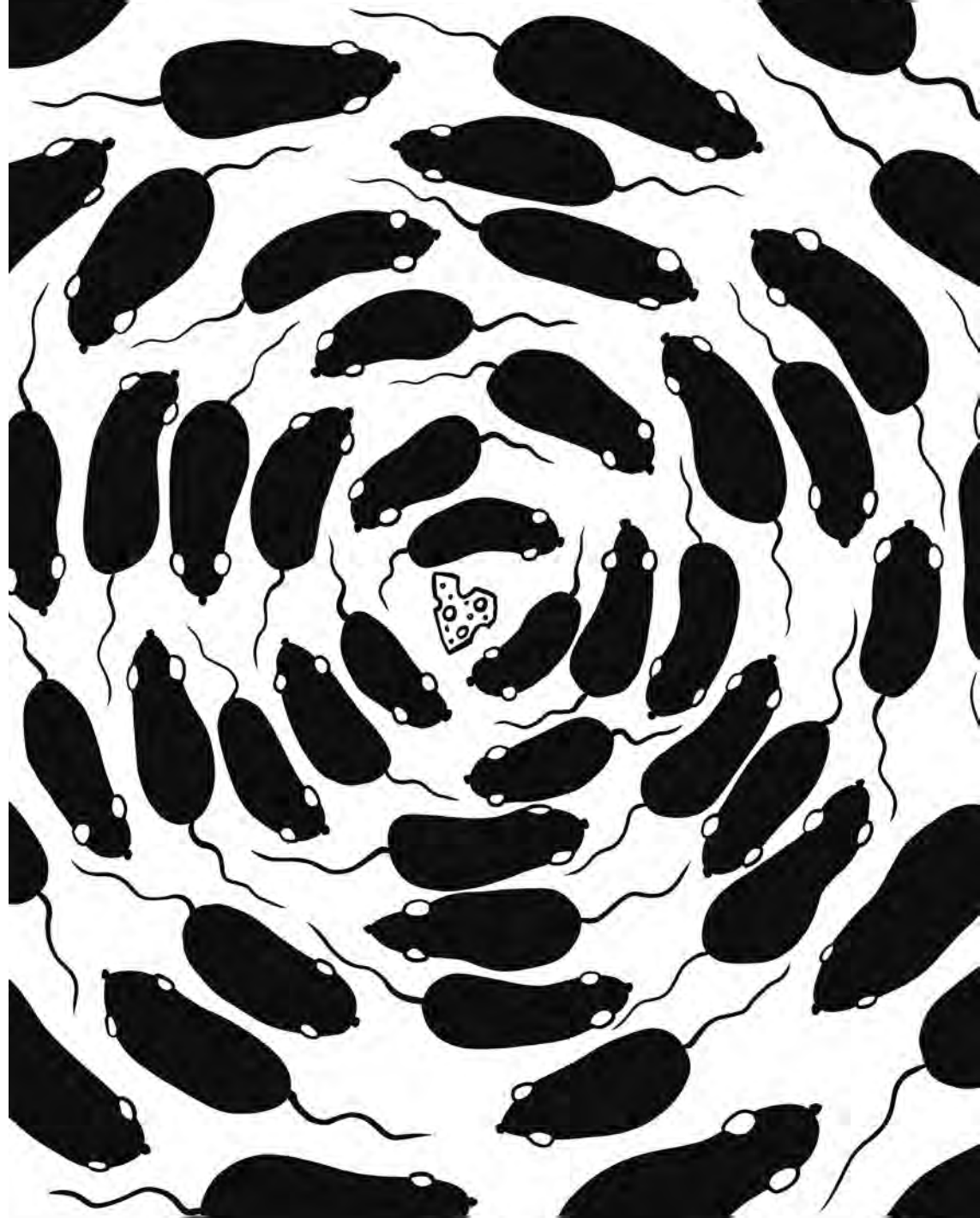




*I made this shitty
Ratatouille zine submission
3 minutes ago and
every time I look at it
I feel immense dread*







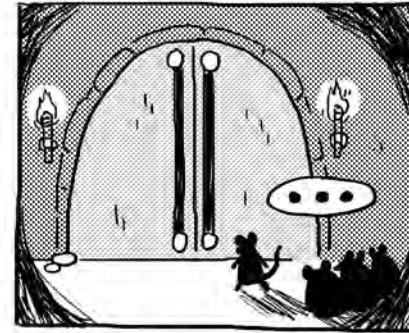
RATACHEWIE



WE'VE BEEN TRAPPED HERE FOR TOO LONG!!

BY GUMLEET





Rodentia Essentia

or

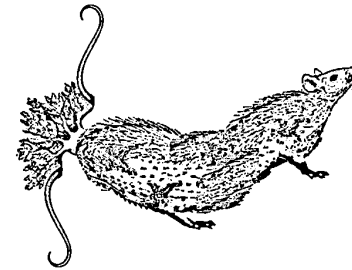
A future rat wine compulsion

Compiled by Jesse Adcock

Sub-par rat wine fills our grocery stores. Let me, Derek, tell you why. The asexual reproductive cycle of this new rat is to blame. This foul thing. I had my son, Derek, draw one. I've attached the image below. Maybe the youth these days, maybe they like a thin rat wine. But, me, Derek, my father before me, Derek, we grew up on the Protand-Rat.¹ A symphony of genetic engineering, our old rats were. These new rats and their resemblance to sea cucumbers ... it haunts me, Derek. The Corporate Alliance of

Vintners (CAV)² is always meddling in the gene pool. Yes, CAV wines retail at less than \$4. Store bought is fine, even preferable, if you're looking to get drunk in your car before a shift. A 750 mL bottle of 12.6 % abv CAV rat wine before work ... it goes down like water, and it might as well be, thin as it is³.

But if you're like me, Derek, and have several DUIs, what makes a good driving wine is irrelevant. So, let's focus on craft, make our own rat wine, and hit the *road-ent!*

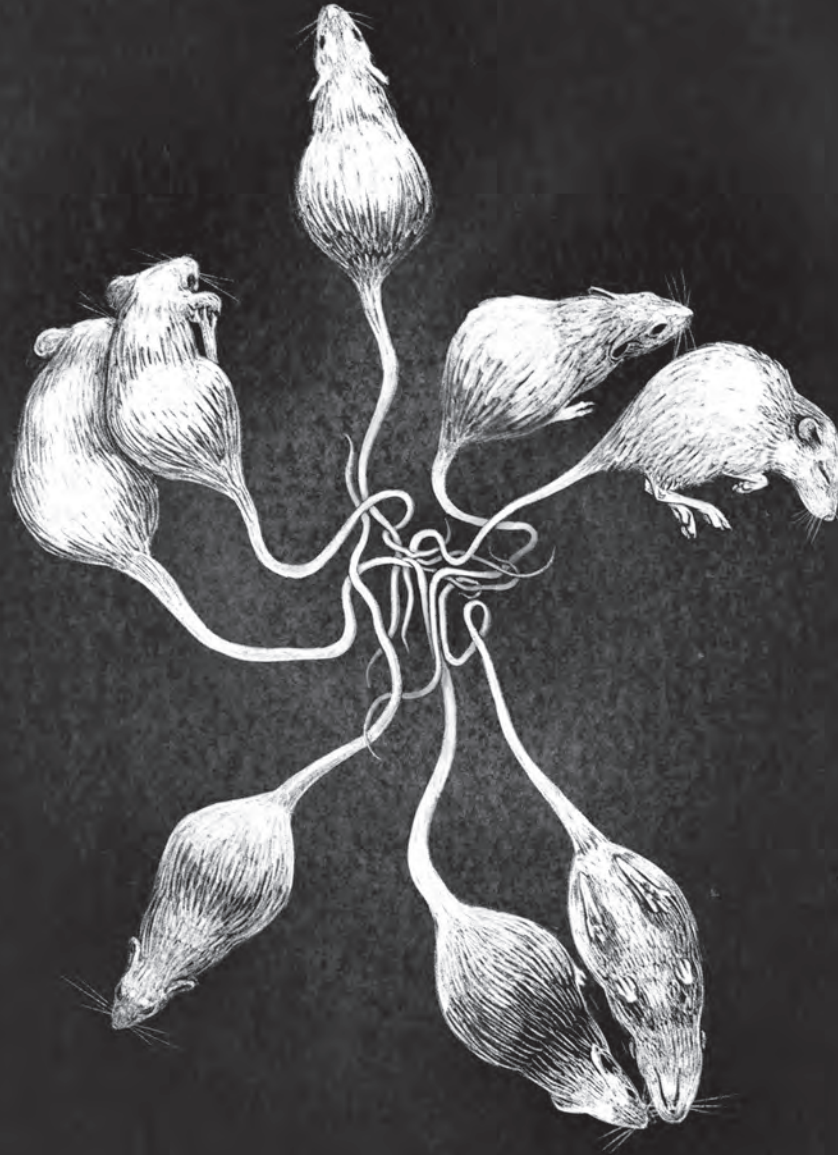
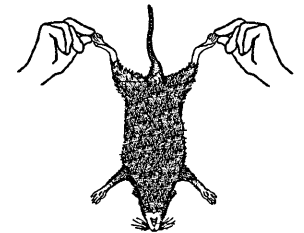


WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- Essentially, you're going to need 800 rats⁴
- A 6 to 8 gallon soup pot⁸
- A 20 volt cordless electric drill⁵ or impact driver with a 1/8 inch bit⁶
- A 5 gallon paint mixer bag⁹
- 10 pounds of sugar⁷
- A 5 gallon carboy and airlock¹⁰

RECIPE

- If you have not already, you need to kill 800 rats¹¹.
- Grip the hindlegs of a rat and pull sharply away from the body. This will break the pelvis of a rat, opening up its body cavity. Insert your drill into the anus of a rat and pulp its insides¹².
- With the soup pot over high heat, and the paint mixer bag stretched over the top, press the rat from throat to hindquarters, draining the paste into the bag. This will filter out most solid forms of rat. Squeeze and dump your bag after every dozen rats or so, making sure to save 10 to 20 rat skins.



- Bring the rat blood to a boil. Make sure to stir frequently or the blood will froth over.
- Slowly stir in your sugar¹³ and take the pot off the heat¹⁴.
- After your rat blood has cooled to room temperature, add 8 oz of rat skins to the mixture¹⁵.
- Seal the carboy with an airlock. Fermentation should begin within a couple of days, yielding a rat wine that is between 10 and 18 % ethanol within a month.

CONCLUSION

I like to age my rat wine for at least a year. Now that we've kept our rat liquids and separated out our rat solids, we need to give time for our rat gases to escape. Though my self-control rarely holds for a full year. If you're like me, Derek, and Friday night rolls around and none of your friends want to drive you to the store, and you're feeling fussy, like you want to firebomb a Honda¹⁶ automotive dealership and cry and call your mom afterwards, well, you'll be glad you've got five gallons of felony fuel humming away quietly in your bedroom closet.

NOTES

¹ In 2230 (or 2:30, known as the year of "Tooth-Hurty" by every practicing dentist) the bioengineer Shulgi Enmebarges crossed the rodent with the vinifera. The rat with the grape. A rhapsody. As a result, this new species of rat, the Protand-Rat, was principally protandric. Protandric organisms can change their sex at will. Additionally, the epidermis of these rats now exhibited the same expansionist qualities of the grape vine, able to tolerate growth of almost 3-and-a-half inches per day with adequate nutrition.

Any two rats could then result in a viable pair, able to produce offspring, who then could mature within a three-day period and repeat the cycle. With an average of six pups, each maturing to be a 5-and-half-ounce rat, every three days, it goes something like two rats divided by two, into a breeding pair, multiplied by six, the average size of a liter - now we have eight rats after three days. Eight rats, divided by two, into breeding pairs, multiplied by six - that's 34 rats at the end of six days, from the original two rats. After six months, this is 27,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 rats. I must thank my brother, Derek, for his help computing this number.

Shulgi Enmebarges never touched anything but rats. He sold the rights to the Protand-Rat to the Imperium of Tyson Foods, Inc., founded by John W. Tyson, as Tyson Feed and Hatchery, in 1947 in Springdale, Arkansas, and signed an ironclad non-compete agreement. Like John W. Tyson, Shulgi Enmebarges died in a train accident.

² After Congress dissolved most anti-trust laws at the president's urging in 2020, compounded by coring out the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission by restricting the department's ability to prosecute civil cases, yeah, the United States did devolve into a neo-feudalist state. State lines became about as

relevant to daily life as ley lines, as where an American stood became more a matter of overlapping company territories. The Piedmont region of the American South is primarily held by Sheetz, Inc., founded by Bob Sheetz in 1952 in Altoona, Pennsylvania, and Marlboro, whose lineage descends from Bond Street in London, in a tobacconist's shop owned by one Phillip Morris, in 1847.

³ Carving the United States up into corporate fiefdoms really did fuck the taste and soul out of the American rat wine industry. In a race to the bottom in the alcohol market (for instance, see the CAV's Squeakling Riesling, retailing at \$3.99 in all Kroger Foods bazaars, founded by Barney Kroger and B.A. Branagan in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1883 as the Great Western Tea Company) most affordable table rat wines no longer mouth feel.

Since 2230, Tooth-Hurty, Shulgi Enmebarges' legacy of the vinifera-crossed protandric rat has dominated animal product markets. The Protand-Rat's skin, now exhibiting certain shared traits with grapes, now also contained tannins.

Tannins are compounds present in most fruit-bearing plants which present on the tongue as a bitter and thick sensation. These compounds evolved to discourage other organisms from eating fruit before it ripened. However, in a ripened fruit, or balanced correctly in a secondary product such as wine or tea, tannins are essential to the full bodied hit that is essentially the root of all tactile pleasure in the mouth ... such as the buttery feeling of dark chocolate on the tongue, or the rich silk of well-brewed coffee.

However, in 2350 (or 3:50, known as the year of "Tree-Fiddy" by every practicing lumberjack) the CAV began researching asexual reproduction as a solution to serious genetic damage emerging among its Board of Directors. Inbreeding is inevitable among oligarchies and other heavily stratified ruling classes, regardless of whether it's 2250's "Elephant Ear" malformations among the board of the Axa Insurance Group Kingdom, founded in 1816 by Theodore Jacques le Carpentier and 17 other shareholders as Compagnie d'Assurances Mutuelles contre l'Incendie in Rouen, France, or the "Habsburg Jaw" which occurred among members of the Hapsburg Dynasty as late the 18th century, rulers of the Holy Roman Empire, which was founded in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1157 by Frederick I Barbarossa.

The CAV's researchers picked up where Shulgi Enmebarges left off, and in seeking novel reproductive traits, found a solution in the asexual nature of sea cucumbers. By modifying a rat's reproductive organs after a sea cucumber's singular gonad, these rats produce both sperm and ova into their own body cavities, as a sea cucumber does. This resulted in clutches of 60 to 200 pups, able to mature and erupt from the newly-installed abdominal slit in a rat every three days.

However, to accommodate such a dramatic increase in body mass, these asexual rats were designed like sea cucumbers to have an ambulacral epidermis - skin like the bottom of star fish or a sea urchin. It is foul. My son, Derek, he refuses to ever draw another.

As a result of this new skin, these rats lack tannins! Wines produced from asexual, sea cucumber rats, as it is in most industrial winemaking processes these days, lack mouth feel!

⁴ Your average rat has about 26 mL of blood in it, but going DIY, you're unlikely to squeeze it all out. In a perfect world, you'd only need 30 rats per bottle, or 730 rats to make 5 gallons of wine. If you're bonded to Lands of Your Employer (LOYE), and are unable to take one of your two annual personal days (#SerfLife) to visit an organic, country rat grow-op, you'll have to settle for vat-grown rat. Luckily for the homebrewer, the CAV does not wholesale their asexual, ambulacral rats, for fears of reverse engineering.

However, being an indentured menial working oneself to death in an urban hellscape can have its benefits. My son, Derek, he loves the shape of smokestacks ... long are the evenings when we discuss the shape of tubes and the flow of commuter traffic. After ordering 800 rats from an Amazon Unlimited Kiosk, founded by Jeff Bezos in Seattle, Washington, in 1994, as Cadabra, select the cog icon for modifying your order. Consent to the retinal scan. A dial tone will issue from the kiosk letting you know its recording, though those things are always recording, prompting you to speak. Say "Prithee, m'lord, please make my 800 rats diabetic."

Glucose weight is key for a high ethanol yield in your rat wine.

⁵ My go-to is the DeWalt 20 Volt MAX Lithium-Ion Cordless drill. My great-uncle, Derek, works for DeWalt, founded by Raymond Elmer Dwalt in Leola, Pennsylvania in 1924 as DeWALT Products Company, on the Confederate Mercantile States of Home Depot, founded in 1978 in Decatur, Georgia, by Ron Brill, Bernard Marcus, Ron Brill and Pat Farrah, as an assembly vassal in Factory City AS. My uncle, Derek, gave me, Derek, this drill for Christmas.

⁶ A steel bit is fine, though I prefer carbide tipped, such as the 1/8" Carbide Tipped Jobber Length Drill Bit sold by Kobalt, founded by Lowe's partner J.H. Williams in 1998. The salinity of rat blood tends to rust steel like seawater does.

⁷ Domino Foods, founded by Edmund Seaman and Frederick Seaman as W. & F.C. Havemeyer Company on Vandam Street in New York City, New York, in 1807, holds court over all things sweet in the United States. But, the CAV holds a patent for a proprietary enzyme which actually breaks down most proteins and the cellulose in blood into fermentable sugars, which I'm told is what the company does to any one of their employees who even coughs the word "union."

⁸ I thought about pledging my first unborn child, Derek, to a 30-year internship contract at CorningWare, founded in 1851 by Amory Houghton as Corning Glass Works in Somerville, Massachusetts, in return for a set of Cornflower-patterned range and oven-to-table cookware. If I'd done that, you know, my wine would be luxuriating in an 8-gallon Pyrocerran soup pot. Instead, my 28-year-old son, Derek, is unemployed, and my shame as a parent is absolute.

⁹ Since the paint principality of Sherwin Williams, founded in 1866 by Edward Williams and Henry Sherman in Cleveland, Ohio, has made owning something even as low caliber as a paintbrush subject to strict licensing and franchising agreements, getting your hands on a paint mixing bag without signing onto a decades-long apprenticeship may be impossible. You may need to suffer a used paint bag to filter your rat wine. In doing so, it is important to look for a bag used for red or white paint. Other pigments, such as blue or green, will pollute the bloody incandescence of your rat wine.

¹⁰ It's likely that the water cooler your Nuclear Family Unit (NFU) leases in its Break and Recreation Room could function as fermentation chamber for your rat wine. If your parents recently died or you've somehow come into money by selling your organs or teeth, the CAV offers used glass carboys on auction starting at \$300 with an included airlock. Otherwise, after finishing off your bottle of antidepressants that you swallowed with breakfast, you can use the bottle, a rifle cartridge, a cork or piece of rubber, and a ballpoint pen to construct an airlock.

¹¹ Typically, using Wesson, founded in 1899 in Savannah, Georgia as the Savannah Oil Company, vegetable oil, I'll slick the inside of a Husky, founded as Husky Wrench in 1924 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin by Sigmund Mandl, trash bag, and dump 30 to 50 rats inside. After tying the top, I'll massage the bag to keep any rats from getting traction. Within 10 minutes all of the rats suffocate.

¹² Start with the barest pulse of the drill on a slow speed. Jumping straight to some insane RPM is the fastest way to blind yourself with rat viscera.

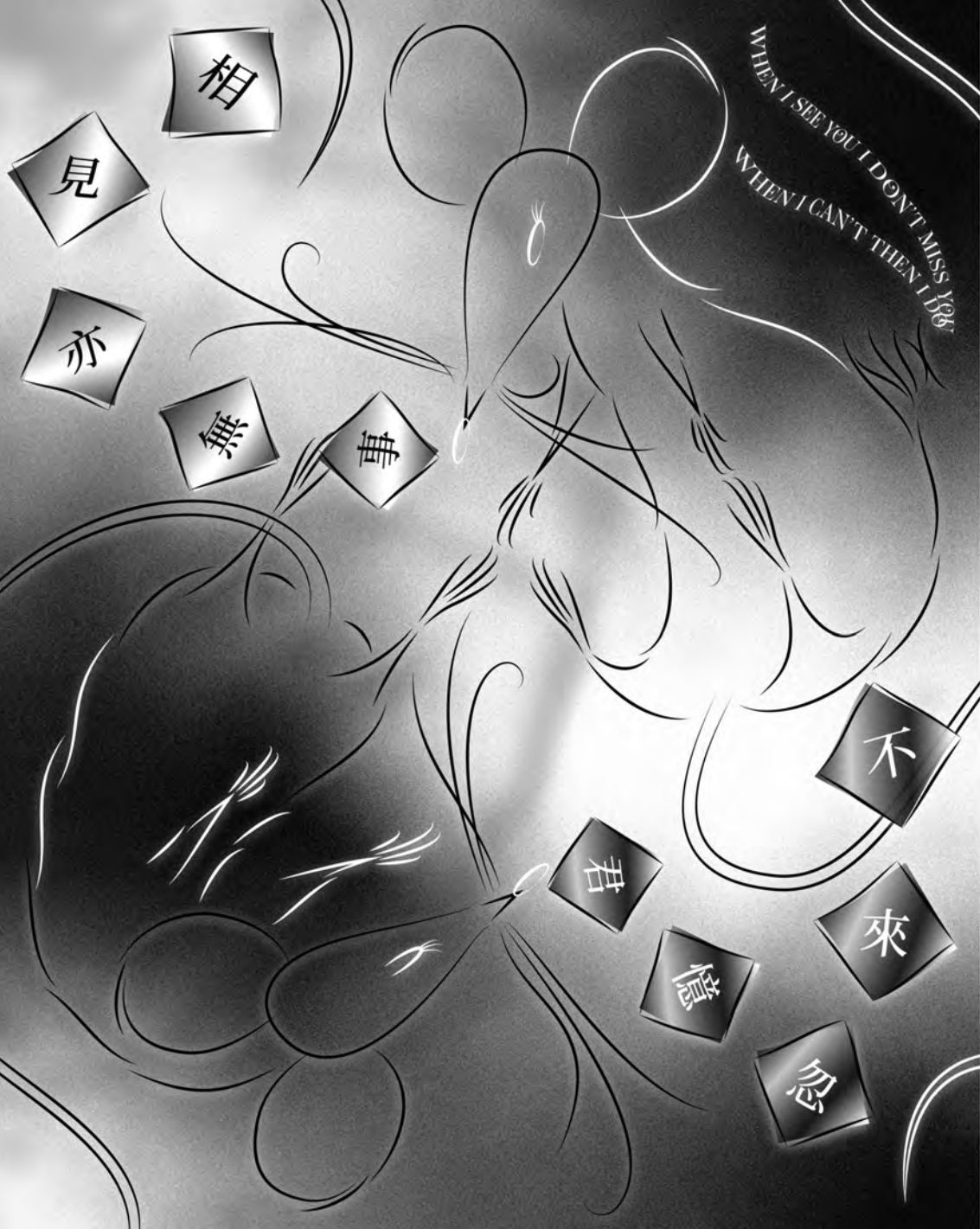
¹³ Do this slowly. If you dump all ten pounds in at once, it will accumulate on the bottom of your soup pot and burn.




¹⁴ Now you have a choice. Well, you always have a choice. You can live an indentured lifestyle or escape this maze, end the rat race and do the noble thing. Stop conflating convenience with freedom. You may leave your sugared rat blood in the pot overnight to cool. This will result in the blood reacting with the air to form a scab that often several inches thick after eight hours. In the morning, if you're not hungry for a rat blood pancake, maybe you'll be in the mood for a game of frisbee? My telephone number is 804 405 5169. While I am not good at catching a rat scab frisbee, yet, I can throw one very far.

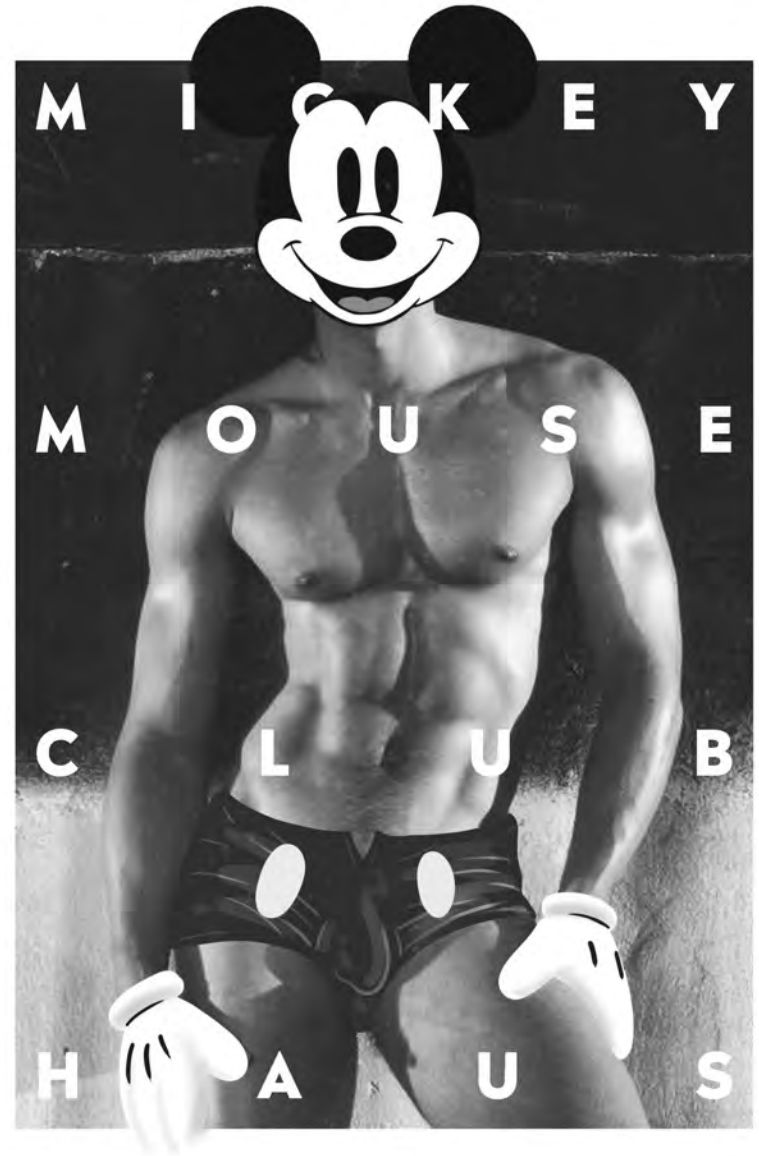
Alternatively, you can transfer the still-hot rat wine to a carboy and seal it - rat gases will push most of the air out, and a much thinner scab will have formed by the time it cools. Either way, your rat blood needs to be room temperature before you add your yeast.




¹⁵ Just like the grape skins that the Protand-Rat skins are derived from, there will be enough wild yeast present on the must to initiate the fermentation process. Your rat wine will likely ferment violently for the next two to three weeks, then it will stabilize. At this point, it will contribute to the overall flavor of your wine to transfer it to another container, and clean the accumulated solids out of your carboy, before the wine begins its secondary fermentation phase and the proteins settle out.

¹⁶ Soichiro Honda founded Tokai Seiki, the predecessor to Honda Motor Company, Ltd., in 1937 in Hamamatsu, Japan.



CKEY MOUSE CLUBHAUS  MICKEY MOUSE CLUBHAUS  MICKEY MOUSE CLUBHAUS  MI



US  MICKEY MOUSE CLUBHAUS  MICKEY MOUSE CLUBHAUS  MICKEY MOUSE CLUBHA



Hi! Welcome to Fartbucks, what'll it be?



Hello, I'd like uh...



COUGH



EXUSE...



Cough *Cough* *Cough*

AAAAA AAAAAA OOOOP

"Deep Throat"
by
JOSH
CROMWELL



FBI. Everyone hands in the air.





IN A WORLD OF LEASELESS PLEASURE...



ATTENTION SPANS WAIN AND INTELLECT HAS BECOME A LUXURY...



NOW SOME HAVE DECIDED TO ACT AGAINST THESE EVIL FORCES!

WATCH: CHEEZNEY PLUS+ Buy! Buy! Buy!



I'M SICK OF THESE CAPITALIST RATS HAVING CONTROL OF EVERY THING I SEE!



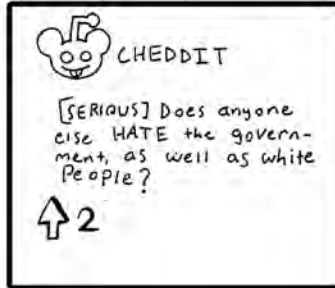
CHEDDAR?



NOW I'M READY TO TAKE A STAND!



TAP



CHREDIT

[SERIOUS] Does anyone else HATE the government, as well as white People?

↑ 2



AH... IT FEELS GOOD TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE.



MEANWHILE...

AT CORPORATE MEDIA MEGA GIANT, CHEEZNEY HQ



CEO OF CHEEZNEY, LAWRENCE RILEYBRIE

PRESENTLY LAWRENCE IS IN A MEETING WITH HIS MEDIA PROMOTER NISLE.



I NEED NEW IDEAS THAT WILL MAKE THIS...

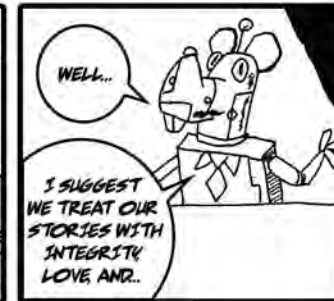
COMPANY SOME MAD CHEDDAR ASAP!



CHEDDAR? LOVE IT. COULD SCORE SOME MAJOR POINTS WITH URBAN YOUTH.



AGREED PEOPLE OF URBAN DESCENT ARE TOTALLY THE "IN" THING RIGHT NOW. BEEP BOOP.



WELL...

I SUGGEST WE TREAT OUR STORIES WITH INTEGRITY LOVE AND...



LOTA WEIGHT



IT'S NOT VALENTINES DAY! THAT SHIT WONT FLY!



KNOCK!

KNOCK!

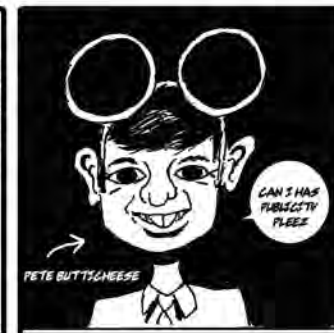
OH FUCKING CUMBALLS! MY 3:30 MEETING!



I ALMOST FORGOT I WAS LOBBYING FOR A FAMOUS POLITYSIAN!



HEY PETE! HOW THE HELL ARE YA!



CAN I HAS FABULICITY PLEEE.

PETE BUTTSCHIESE



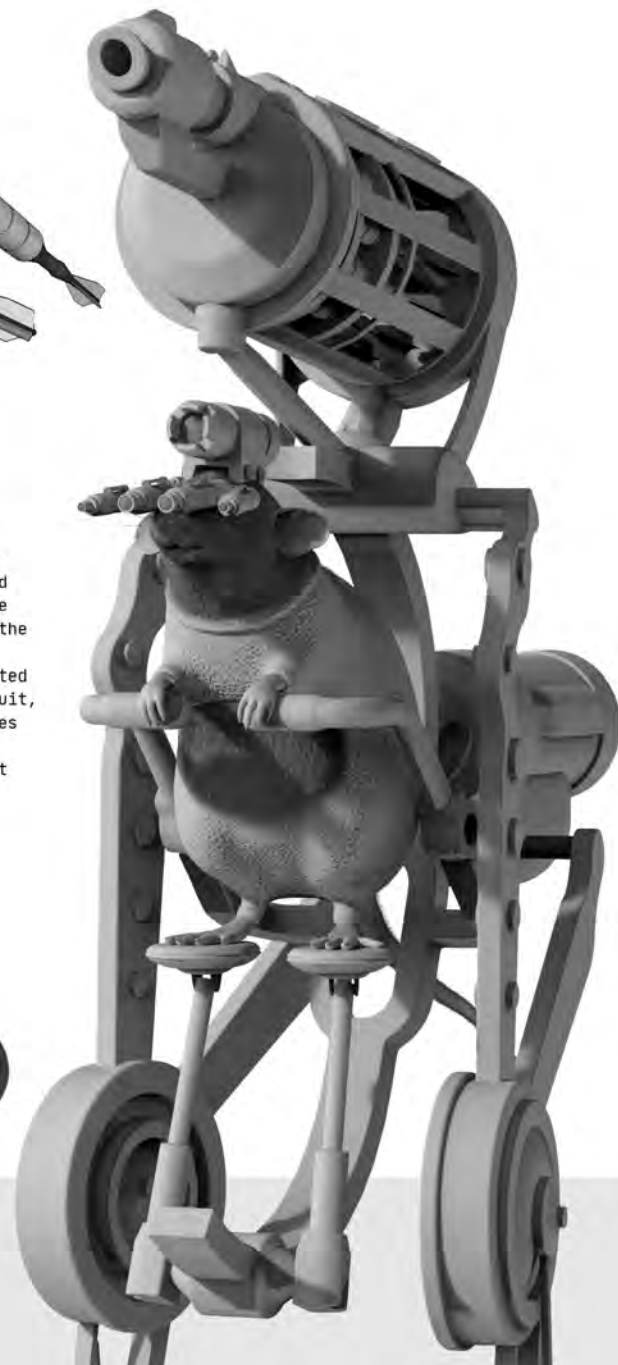
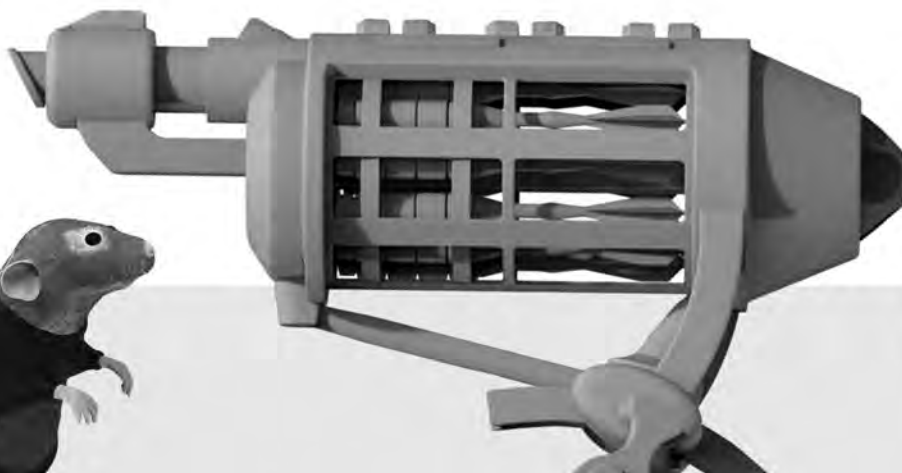


SPECIAL AGENT: [PECAN]

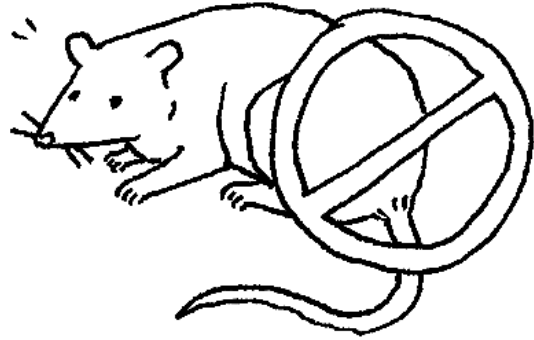
R.A.T.S. Inc. (*Rodent Augmentation Technology & Services*) is an independent firm specializing in the cybernetic augmentation and genetic engineering of rats -- to be used for both military and civilian tactical operations.



SPECIAL AGENT PECAN is one of the very first subjects to be deployed as a Wetworker rat. Wetworkers are used on a case-by-base basis for the purpose of target neutralization (or elimination). Pecan is outfitted with a user response based mech suit, twelve explosive propelled syringes (contents vary), laser-assisted targeting, and dual infrared night vision goggles.

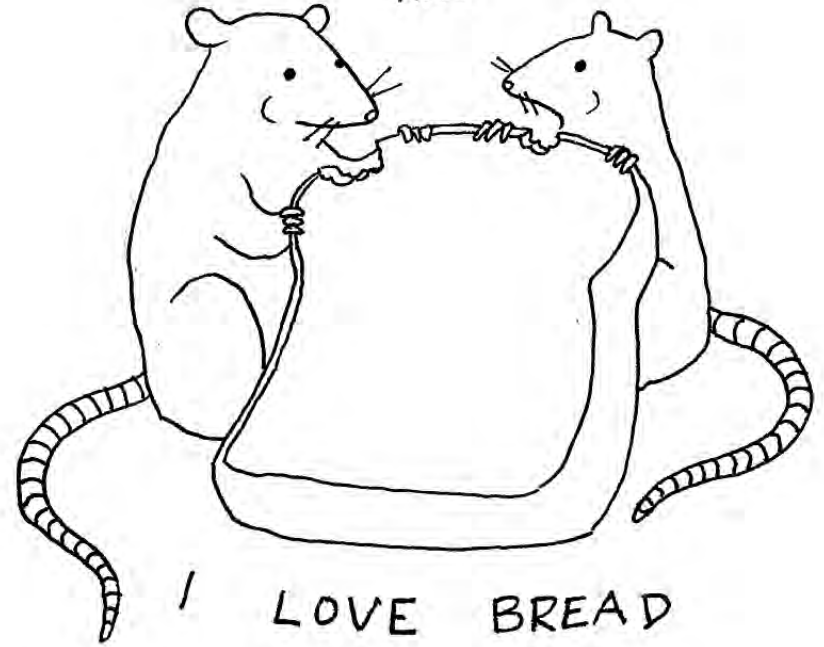


I DON'T GIVE A RAT'S ASS



BECAUSE IT'S NOT MINE TO GIVE

MISERY LOVES COMPANY
AND



I LOVE BREAD



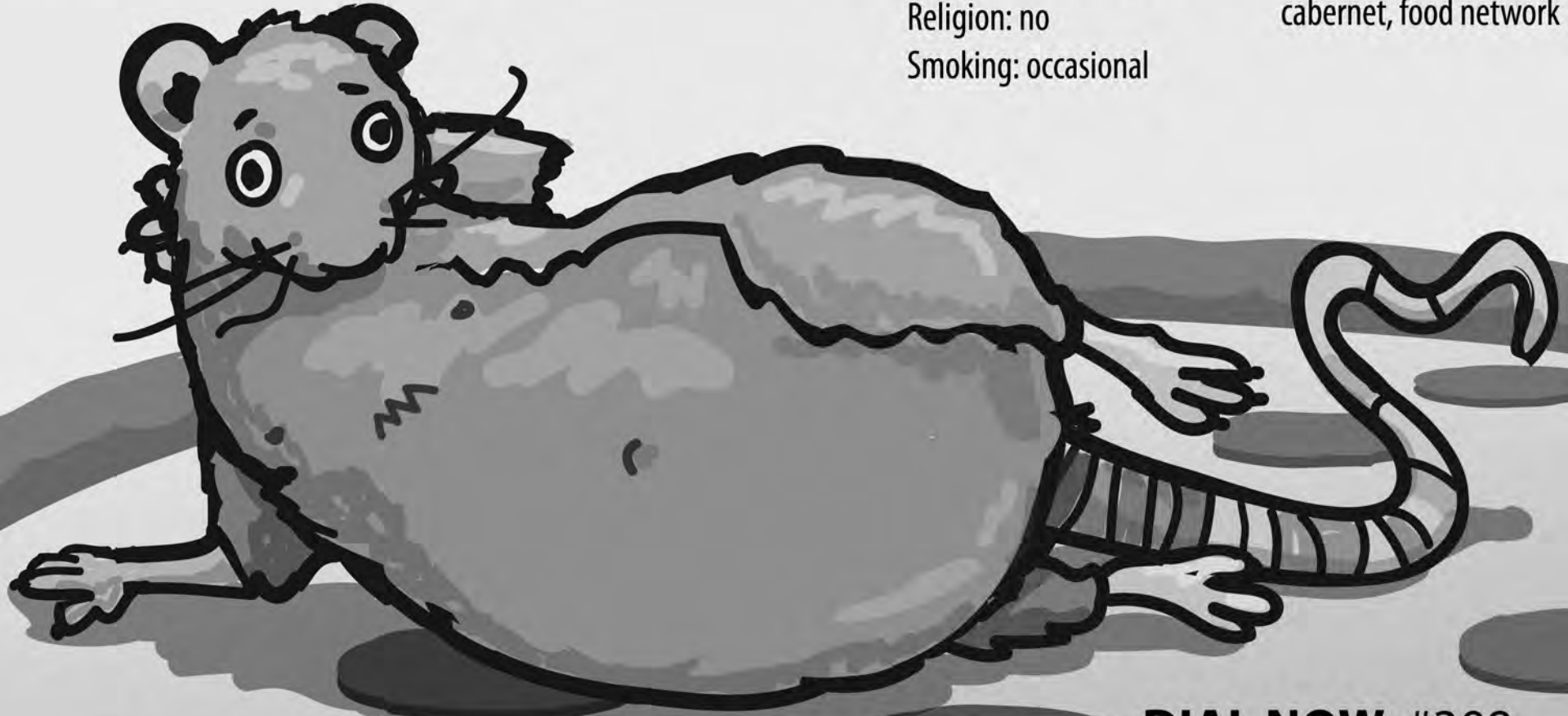
THE LACTOSE-INTOLERANT RAT



Eggbert Rattberg

Age: 41
Length: 25"
Location: Lower Bronx
Religion: no
Smoking: occasional

Sign: Pisces
Likes: napping, peanuts, caramel,
hugs, crunchy leaves, beetles,
cabernet, food network



#309

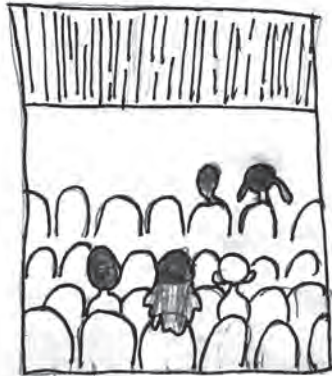
DIAL NOW #309
to chat with EGGBERT

HAMELIN



RAT PACK

BY SOPHIA BELLETTI



NOW
PRESENTING
THE RAT
PACK!



ALEXANDRA91TMV2020

NAME: Soy

PUBLIC OFFENSES:

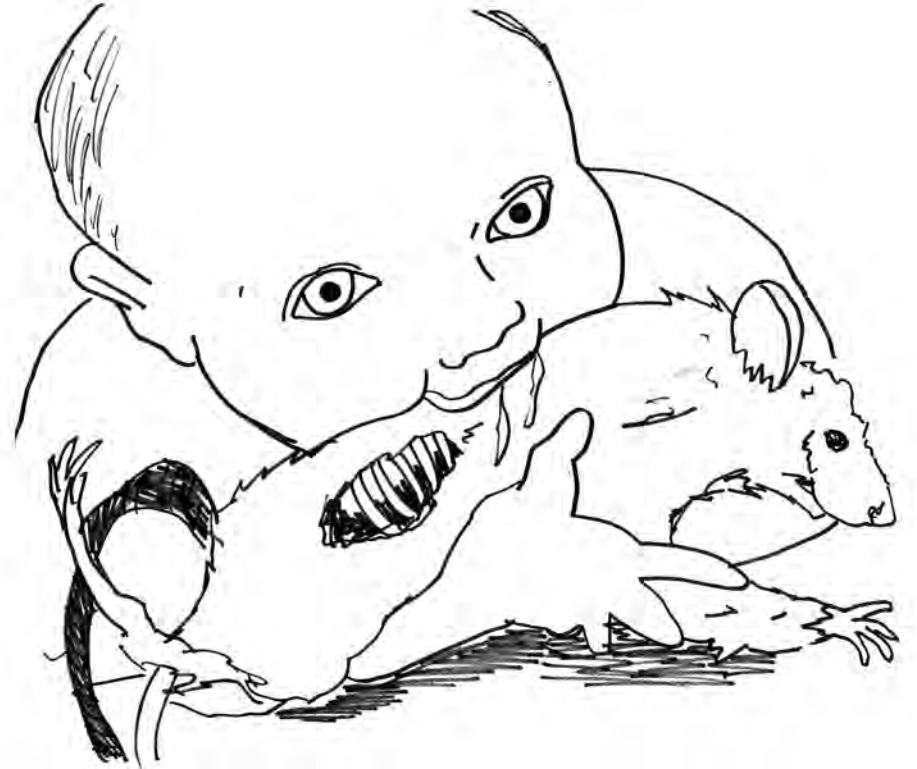
- chewing up cords
- eating my damn oreos

PUNISHMENT:

- death by electrocution (via chewed up cords)







RATS! WE'RE RATS! WE'RE THE RATS!

WE PREY AT NIGHT...

WE STALK AT NIGHT...

WE'RE THE RATS!



I'M DA GIANT RAT

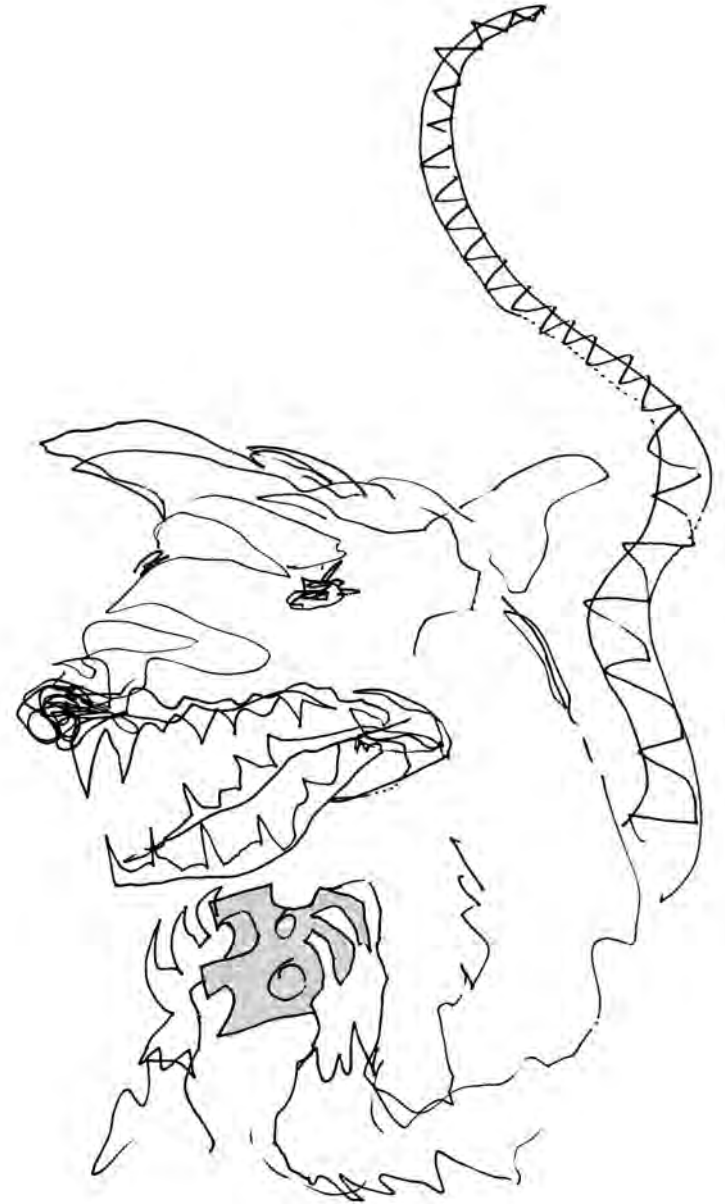
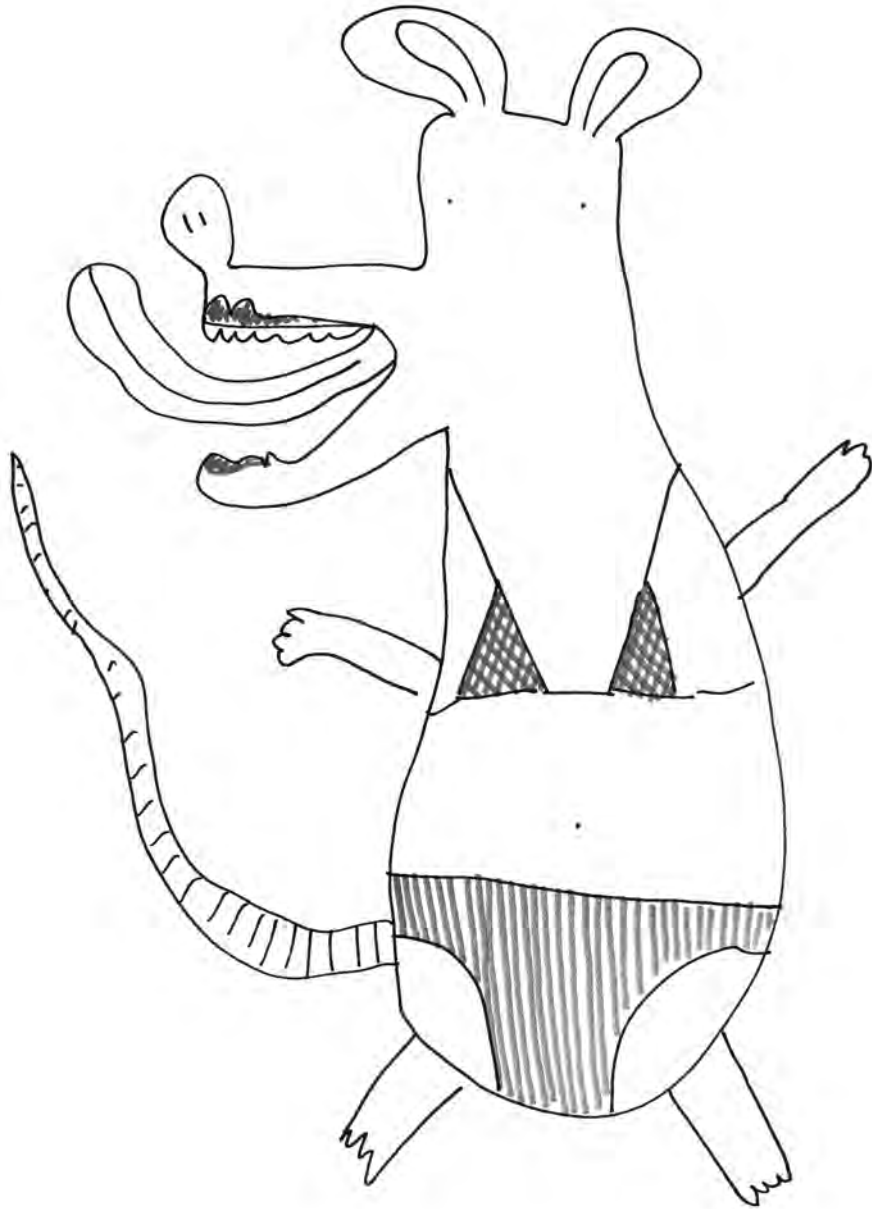


DAT MAKES ALL OF DA RULES

LET'S SEE WHAT KIND OF TROUBLE



WE CAN GET OURSELVES INTO



JAZZ RATS

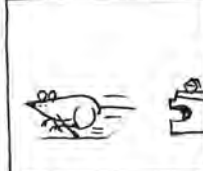
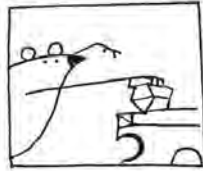


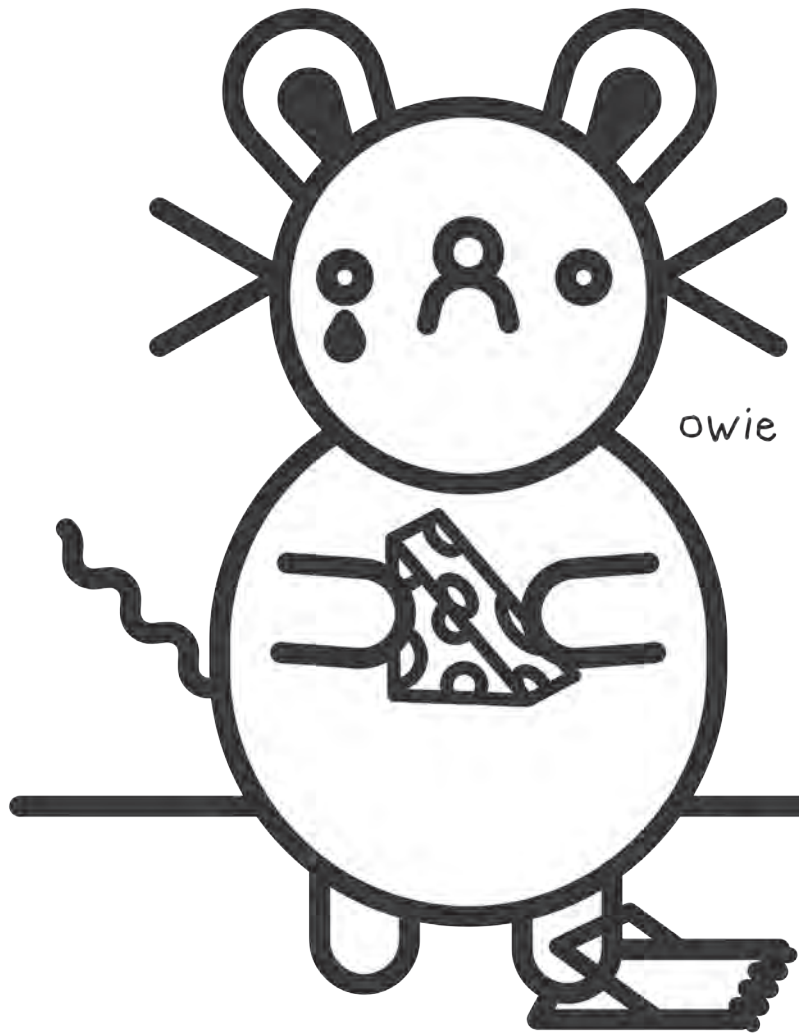
POOPY PANTS



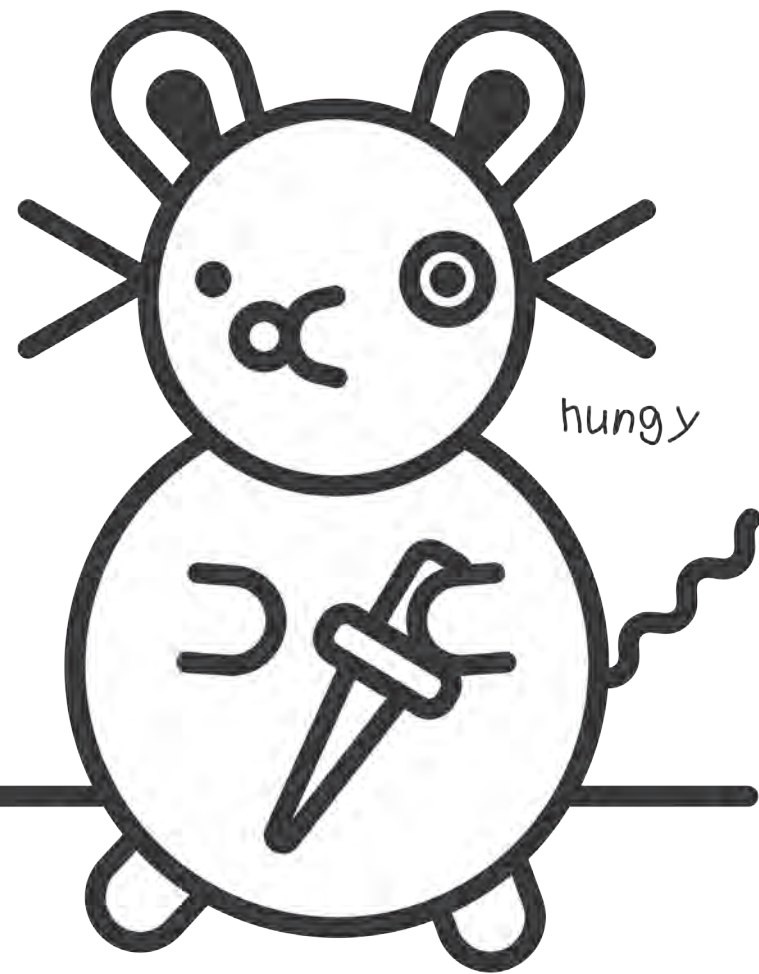
THE KINGDOM

KYLE
WILLIAMS
STEPHENS





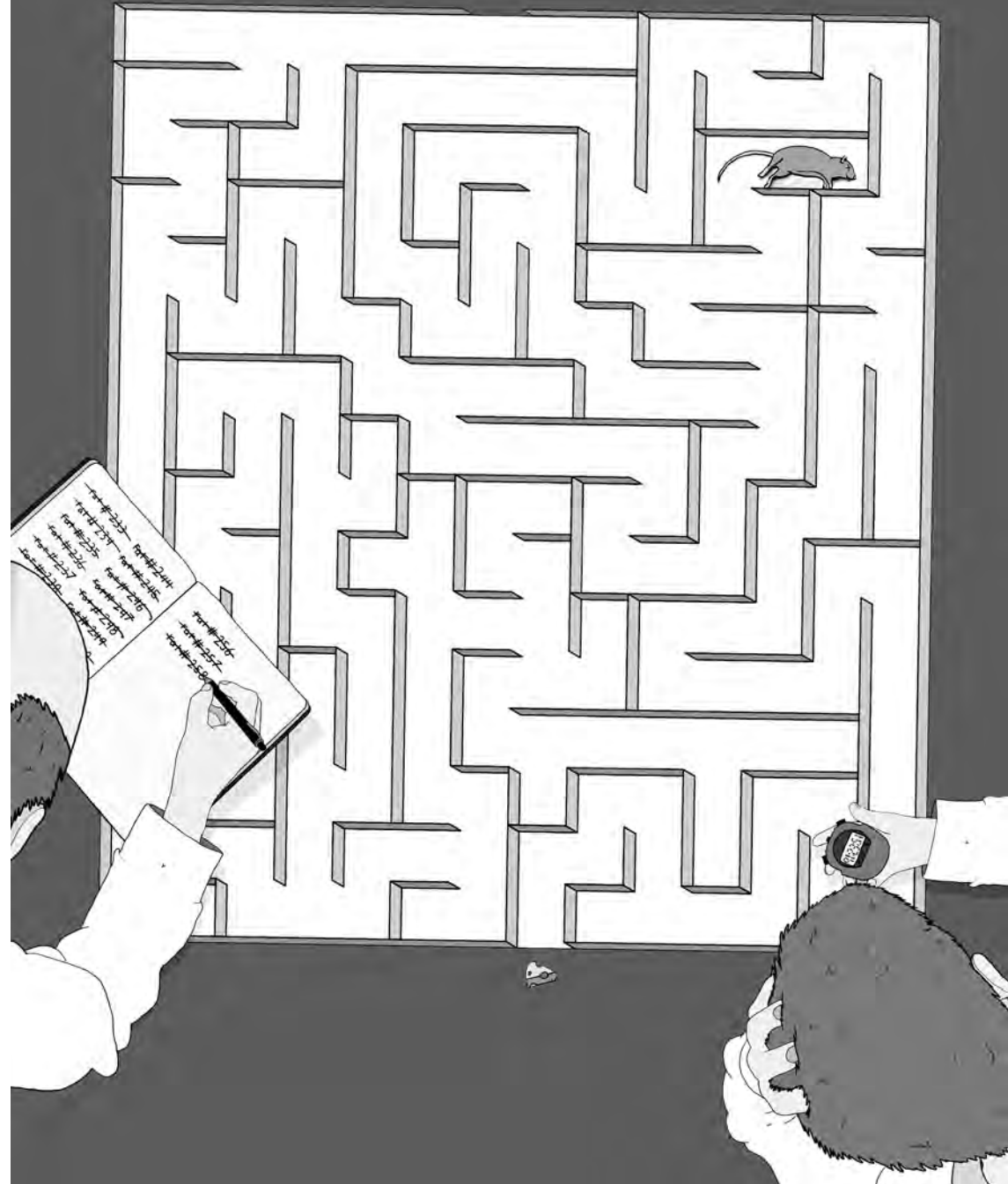
owie



hungry

cheese plate?







Rufus, Reba and the Rats of the River

ZACH JOACHIM



CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF, Rufus was a clean rat, thank you very fucking much.

Rats get a bad wrap, he thought. Rodents are vermin and carry diseases, blah, blah ...

That was what they all told him. But he was determined to break the mold. So on a subliminal midsummer's eve, he crawled down to the basement of the apartment building his family inhabited. His sister, Reba, was down there with her boyfriend, Roscoe. Rufus heard impassioned squeaks as he made his way down the pipe, so he let out a squeal of his own to give them fair warning.

Rufus rounded the corner to see them casually licking each other as if nothing had been going on. The basement was large and mostly empty, save for a few scattered bricks and buckets, and a washer and dryer in the corner. Ooh, and Carol, the apartment's resident black widow. Sometimes Rufus came down here to ask her for advice. She was sort of the sage of the apartment building. But right now, she was up in her corner, turned away from where Reba and Roscoe sat on top of a bucket in the middle of the room. Water dripped from pipes, and the humid air sat thick on the room's occupants. Rufus heard a human drop something heavy in the apartment above them.

"Hey sis, I got a favor to ask," Rufus said. He didn't plan on giving Roscoe the time of day. Fuck that guy. He was everything people hated about rats, but for some reason Reba refused to acknowledge that.

“Fuck off,” Reba responded. “Can’t you see we’re busy down here?”

“I can, and I chose to save Carol the horror of watching you two squeak one out,” Rufus responded with a chuckle. “I mean, get your own fucking room. Or pipe. Or alleyway. I mean shit, come on, you’ve got options. We’re rats, we fit under baseboards.”

Rufus heard Carol laugh, but it turned into a snort as she attempted to stifle it.

“Fuck you, Carol,” Reba yelled into the corner.

Abruptly, Carol dropped all pretenses.

“Ooh, fuck me? Fuck me, Reba?” Carol said incredulously, as she spun a line of web, descended to the floor and scuttled over to the bucket in the middle of the room.

“What are you even doing with this piece of shit? Look at your brother. That’s how a real rat acts. This Roscoe fella must be big in the fur ’cause you have no other reason to be with him.”

Reba rolled her eyes but knew better than to cross Carol. That bitch, God bless her, would not hesitate to lay a bite on anyone she didn’t approve of. Rufus loved her for it. It kept the bad rats out of the building.

After a few seconds of awkward silence — during which Roscoe started to say something until Reba yanked his tail — Rufus spoke, slowly and apprehensively.

“I need you to make me look dirty, sis.”

Nobody spoke for a moment, until Roscoe let out a chuckle, which was not a good idea.

“Are you LAUGHING AT MY RUFUS?!” Carol shrieked.

“Run,” Reba muttered to Roscoe.

He bolted, but Carol was too quick for him. By the time his feet hit the floor she was in front of him. A mad dash ensued, which Rufus actually admired because typically once Carol decided she didn’t fuck with you, you were as good as gone. Roscoe got further than expected until Carol threw out a web, which caught the top of the doorway above the stairs. Roscoe reached the bottom step, freedom in his eyes, only for Carol to descend straight on top of him.

Roscoe shrieked, whimpered and crawled hastily up the last few steps. But it was all for naught. You had about five minutes left once Carol got hold of ya.

She scuttled back to the bucket with blood and a gleeful grin on her fangs.

“Let me know where he snuffs it so I can have dinner later, will you?” she said to Reba.

Rufus’ sister laughed. She was a shithead when it came to the guys she chose, but otherwise a good sibling. She was also not an idiot and knew being on Carol’s good side was part of staying alive in this decrepit yet quaint apartment building they called home.

“I got you, he won’t get out the alleyway. I’ll drag him back down here later for you.”

“There’s a good girl,” Carol said before climbing up the bucket to sit next to Reba. Except she didn’t stop there — once she’d gotten to the top, she hopped on Reba’s back to look down at Rufus, who was thoroughly enjoying the commotion his presence had initiated.

“Dirty, you say?” Carol asked. “Why my darling prince Rufus, why would the cleanest, most handsome rat on the whole damn block need that? Why, just the other night I thought I heard you and Rachel — ”

Reba’s eyes got wide, and Carol stopped talking as Rufus shook his head at her.

“Brother, if you are fucking my best friend you’d better start running,” Reba said angrily.

Rufus ignored her.

“It’s just ... there’s this girl, OK?”

Carol nodded, beckoning him to go on. Reba’s eyes were narrow but intrigued. She’d known he was fucking Rachel for weeks now, she just didn’t want to admit it to herself.

“And ... and she’s not like the other rats.”

Carol cocked her head and smiled. Reba cocked hers and frowned. Carol was still on top of her which made the whole situation enjoyable to Rufus because his sister was shaking slightly.

“She ... I don’t think she likes me like this — slick, trim hair, you know, this whole princely thing I got going.”

Carol’s smile turned to a frown.

“Well, then she’s not worth your time love,” she said, with a hint of a scold.

Rufus pawed the floor. He usually took Carol’s advice at face value. She was essentially a mother to him since his own had passed away — damn rat traps.

But Rufus just ... felt something when he looked into this girl's eyes. Something he'd never felt before. He wanted to roll in the mud with her, and steal food from humans' trash. He wanted to run away from this apartment building, go down to the river with all the river rats. The city rats hated them — their fur was always matted, and they did lots of drugs. Rufus was supposed to be a prince of sorts among the city rats. And this feeling he got when he looked into her eyes ... it was as if they held an escape from the confines of what everyone told him he was supposed to be.

Carol finally jumped down onto the side of the bucket and scuttled to Rufus. Reba breathed a sigh of relief, and jumped down herself.

It was Reba that spoke first.

“Brother, I get it. Roscoe ... ugh, he wasn't even big in the fur. He just ... I suppose he represents something to me, ya know?”

Rufus shared one of the more understanding looks he ever had with his sister.

Then the door to the basement opened, and human feet appeared on the top step. They all knew the drill at this point — Rufus and Reba crawled hastily under the bucket, and Carol ascended to the ceiling directly over them. The human began carrying laundry over to the washer and dryer. Then Rufus flung himself into the side of the bucket, which moved an inch.

Rufus and Reba couldn't see, but the human froze, head snapped around to stare at the bucket in the middle of the room. The human cautiously walked over to them, its empty laundry basket cocked behind its head as if the human intended to use it as a weapon.

The human nudged the bucket with their foot, which was Carol's queue to do her thing. Before the human could lift the corner of the bucket, Rufus and Reba heard an anguished yell, then running footsteps and a door slamming.

They crawled out from under the bucket and gasped.

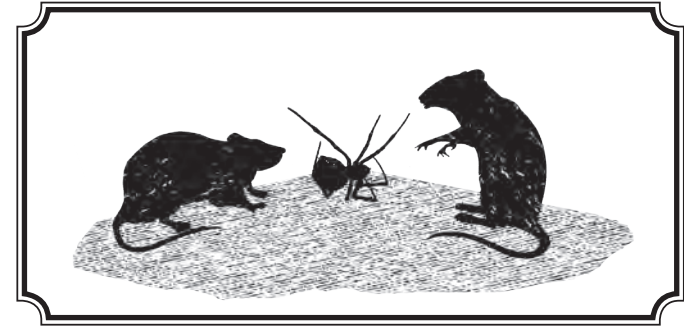
Carol was lying in front of them, four of her legs on one side crushed.

“It happens, it happens, I'm alright. Motherfucker was quick, slapped at me before I could jump off its neck. I did get it in the neck though so there's a chance it'll die. I'll be fine, the legs regenerate,” she said with a sigh.

“Well, do you want us to move you to your corner or something?” Rufus asked. Carol nodded, and Rufus put his nose out, nudging it under her four good legs.

She grabbed hold of his snout, and Reba got close next to him so Carol could use her for support as well. Together, they carried the aging, sagely black widow, their adopted mother, over to her corner.

She sighed and smiled as they set her down.



“You two, you two. I probably would have died a while back if I didn't have you to keep track of. You know what? Leave me be. I'll be just fine. It's beautiful outside tonight, why don't you go down to the river?”

She knew it's what they'd both always wanted. But their mother's rule had been never leave the city, and the two had been good friends, so Carol had tried to raise Rufus and Reba as their mother would have.

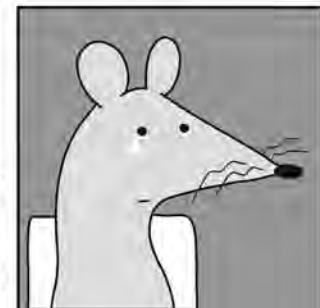
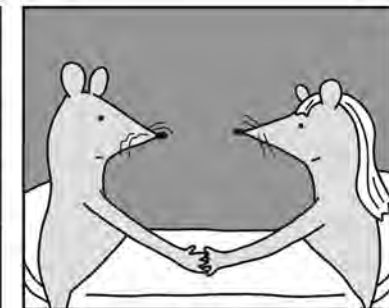
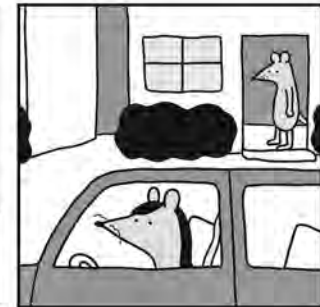
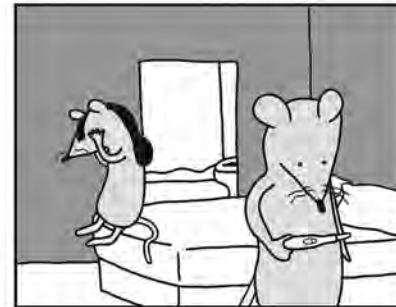
But they were young adults now, and Carol knew as much. They must be allowed to decide who they wanted to be on their own.

So Rufus and Reba kissed her goodbye before scurrying to the steps, out the door and down the alleyway. It took them a while to get out to the river, so they spent the night, lost in a life they'd always yearned for. They stayed the next day, and that turned into a week of mud, river water, trash for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and some much-needed drugs and sex.

The siblings returned home to find an apartment building that smelled of poison. They never saw Carol again, and after a brief mourning period, lived out their days among the rats of the river.

After a time, it felt like home.





***I AM SIMPLY
MANY RATS
IN A HUMAN SUIT.***



Infestation

Our house was messy in a lot of ways.

There were always dishes in the sink and shoes all over the entryway. Papers and notebooks covered every desk, and the floor wasn't often visible in either child's room. There was never a quiet moment; bickering turned into yelling turned into crying turned into loud silence.

Things came to a peak when crosshairs of conflict became too much. We got a mouse problem. A rat problem.

Mom set up traps around the house that never quite did the trick. Don't get me wrong, I started many mornings with the sight of light brown fur and legs crumpled into an unnatural shape. But nothing ever seemed to fix the problem.

Kinda like all those sit-downs and apologies that came after the ugliest, most painful words that sunk so deep, today I can not remember their meanings, only dark, hot fear and hurt. As a toddler, a child, an adolescent, a young woman, I faced rounds of fierce hate followed by hazy pleading for forgiveness that brought so much gaslighting, I felt like I was floating afterward.

Remembering my childhood home feels disgusting. I don't think I'll ever finish ridding myself of the grime.



