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FREUD'S RAT MAN WAS CONFLICTED

My father grew rich on the backs of rats and roaches and silverfish. They built him a big house with a 50-foot-pool and a three-car garage. On a sultry night when the air is close and judgmental, he hovers like a malignant demon, all ego and ire.

The next day, he crashes to Earth when the garbage man leaves him a form letter noting the improper disposal of pesticide cans. "Does he know who is talking to?" demands my father, who cruises outside the garbage man's home in his unmarked truck, brutish and bent on revenge. "Does he fucking know?"

My sister tells everyone that she hates him. That's why she slashes her arms with razors and knives and other devices better directed at him.

He tells my sister that she's too fat for gymnastics.

He calls her a pig and a whore.

My sister shows her team mates her lacerated arms; she says she got 14 stitches last year and spent three weeks in a psych ward. Inside, they talked about eye movement desensitization, stress and anxiety. She's on meds now, she confides, her face so dark and glowering that it scares the other girls.

With everything tilting in one direction, they lurch to safe themes. They tell my sister that sometimes they drink coolers and they show her where they stash them. She tells the coach and now they're suspended. "I'm rich as fuck," she boasts, sounding just like him.

Besides his pest control empire, my father owns a nursing home, a par three golf course and a steak house. He tells his clients that my sister is going to the Olympics. He's president of her club and the whole provincial association. No one will run against him.

A shrewd businessman, he keeps an office in our house which allows him to deduct lights, heat and household expenses. To satisfy the tax people, he stores an electric fogger, double-ended traps and poisons in a shed by the pool.

My sister tells a new girl—a vaulter named Rina—that our mom's an alcoholic. She tells Rina that she slashes her arms with razors and knives and other devices better directed at him, and then she hammers Rina from behind, fracturing her arm.

I did the math.

Rats have litters of 6 to 12 young, and young rats can reach reproductive maturity in three months. Breeding is most active in spring and fall. The average female has four to six litters per year. Rats can live 18 months, but most die before one year. There are no rats in here, just nurses and doctors who try to force food down my throat not seeing that I am growing fatter each day until I become as huge and greedy as my father.

Before I got too fat for gymnastics, he would sit at my gym and watch me train. I felt like a bug he could crush at any time. Grinning like a good old boy, exchanging niceties with unwary parents, making small talk about fishing and the weather, pretending that nothing mattered when nothing mattered more. Sometimes he wore oversized jeans and suspenders

to appear disarming. The most successful exterminators are discreet and cold-blooded.

Freud's Rat Man was ambivalent about his father; did he want him to die or not? Rat Man's father was probably more deserving of life.

Only the rats can stop him, I believe. Human devices like reason and moral boundaries will not work. Like the rats, he has no conscience. If you cross him, he will pay a hacker to invade your online life; he will poison your cat, stalk your children over minor disagreements that others would simply shrug off. Pretending to be lost, he will stroll into your workplace with his bug-killing crew. Norway rats are husky, brownish rodents that weigh about 11 ounces. They are about 13 to 18 inches long including the 6 to 8 1/2 inch tail.

A rat's incisor teeth grow one half inch per month. These teeth are harder than steel and attached to jaws that exert a pressure of 7,000 pounds per square inch. They can gnaw through sewer pipes or walls. Rats will eagerly feed on humans if they are still or unconscious; they eat babies in their cribs.

My mother drinks until she drops like a fumigated roach. Sometimes my father leaves her on the floor, sometimes he tells my sister to pick her up. When he watches my sister train, he smiles his good old boy smile while his eyes track her like a red-beamed laser. My sister is stronger than I am. My doctor says I have gymnast's wrist which causes a premature closure of the growth plates. According to my specialist: "Repeated stresses affect the distal radial growth plate, causing undergrowth of the radius, and a resultant ulnar-plus variance." The normal treatment is wrist splints, but severe cases require arthroscopic debridement. I may have a permanent deformity.

When my sister lost provincials to a girl named Nelle, my father bought her a VW Bug convertible as a statement. Pink with a vanity plate: GYMRAT. My sister drove to Nelle's school and offered her boyfriend a ride. They had sex, she told everyone, in a parking lot near the river. She let him drive.

Freud's Rat Man, a conflicted young lawyer named Ernst Lanzer, was killed in World War One, precluding any follow-up of his condition. Although Freud wrote extensively about his patient and his obsessions, did Rat Man have more to say?

Last night, they made me eat. When they force food on me, I feel a panic in my chest as though I am trapped in a cell, imprisoned by flesh, frenzied. Sometimes the panic, which revs and races like a caffeine attack, lasts for hours, sometimes for days. Rats can hide in piles of firewood, overgrown shrubs, old mattresses or discarded furniture. They are cunning.

I will not let them feed me again. I am tough enough to win. While I was still competing, I had a herniated disc and a hyperextended knee. I don't believe the scales which say I weigh 87 pounds. When the doctors show me the numbers, I nod, refusing to be tricked. I can feel the fat on my body, oppressive and suffocating like a snowmobile suit, zipped tight, with an 8 ounce liner. It chokes me.

In the Chinese city of Tangshan, someone sprinkled rat poison on breakfast food served at the Heshengyuan Soy Milk snack shop, killing 40 people and sickening 300 more. Police arrested the owner of a rival restaurant. In parts of China, murder by rat poison is so rampant that the government is raiding homes and arresting citizens who harbour the poison.

Rodents are difficult to kill with poison because they are scavengers. They eat a tiny amount and then wait. If they don't become ill, they continue. An efficient rodenticide

must be tasteless and odorless in lethal concentrations, and have a deferred effect.

Our shed is full of rodenticide and little by little, my sister is putting it in his food, titrated to the right dose and time period. It's a slow killer. A superwarfarin that thins the blood and causes internal hemorrhaging.

Sometimes the brain bleeds slowly and imperceptibly like a bird caught in a trap