

Rat Reunion Summer

Pauline Mortensen

It was a great day when I did not pass out because of the rat. Elaine said, "You stay by that door, and I will go in this door and chase him out of the closet there." And she pointed at where I was kneeling on the floor in front of the first door with a pie plate in my hand. Then when the rat came through, there was a great scurry of frantic feet past my knees. But the important thing is—I did not run. I did not run, scream, or faint. It was a great day for little sisters, a great day for womankind. For when we finally convinced the rat to run in the right direction, we managed to pin him permanently between the wall and a free-flying utensil drawer.

We did this because rats are a serious matter. It is important to remember that. In the clinches. You never want to turn your back on an overconfident rat. He moves when you move. Takes up the slack in the distance between you. You turn around and there he is three feet closer. Nearer the mark. So you have to face him off. Nose to nose. It's the only way.

Roger and I have lain awake for a week in the loft of our unfinished cabin in the mountains of northern Idaho, listening for another rat. There is only this one rat. We are pretty sure. Only one who came in through a hole in the eaves when we piled some boards against the outside, only one we heard squeaking his twigs in between the wall and the tin roof and saw disappear in our flashlight beam, catlike into the wall. Every night we listen for the sounds of rustling, the slight cough of something disturbed. We know he is still there although we haven't seen him for two days. We know he is still there because every morning we find the black nuggets of his indiscretion, placed in patterns of three all over the cabin floor, by the wood box, by the door, beside our shoes and socks. Little notes he leaves for us, "Kilroy Was Here," "Yankee Go Home," and "I have not yet begun to fight." Little MacArthur messages, nibbled in the ends of bread sacks, promising, "I shall return."

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And here is the thing. We personify the rat. I know we personify the rat. What else can we do when he scratches rat tracks across our dreams? We have to play his game. We have to play by his rules. We have to stay on the same rat wavelength, or we may miss everything.

I fold back the covers for a minute. I think I heard something. I listen in the night air, my face suddenly cold. "Do you hear anything?" I whisper. Roger comes out for air too, tunes in his radar in the direction of the rail. "Sounds like the kitchen."

"Are you sure? Are you sure it wasn't by the door?" We have left the poison by the door.

"No, the kitchen sink. I think he is thirsty."

We hear nothing for a while, get cold, and then cover our heads again. This is the way we sleep. We leave as little as possible to chance. We pull in our arms and legs, never leave them dangling out over the side to attract things that go bump in the night, never leave an excess of anything exposed, an invitation to rat-bite. There is only the tiny opening for our faces in the covers, only our senses sticking out, for breathing and for listening. There is no such thing as an absolutely quiet rat.

And this has been our camping experience this summer, getting ready for the family reunion, putting in windows, putting in doors, putting in the loft, putting in rat-protection. Elaine says, "I don't know how you can stand to sleep out there with a rat," a comment aimed at only the four-legged kind. Elaine is safe and secure over at the old house, safe and asleep within the same walls where we killed the closet rat, a closet rat that Elaine said was smaller than the both of us. "I don't know how you can sleep with a rat," my sister says, the same sister that only yesterday stood safe across the room, saying "Get him, Franki. Get him," as we chased some incredibly small field mouse across that same kitchen, only out the back door this time.

And she is the one who put me up to this, twenty-five years ago, the one who said I was brave to stand up to the first rat, the one who made me afraid to admit that I was afraid. Elaine, my sister, whose feet have turned to clay after all these years.

So this is her fault. I owe it all to her. My face will be gnawed away before I will admit that I am a coward. As for Roger, there is nothing in particular that he has to prove, but he will stay here by my side, spending a faithful rat-vigilance in the loft of our cabin.

We listen for the sounds of rolling dice, rat games on the lower level. Roger thinks he hears something. I think about the poison we have put out, the boxes of pellets placed where the rat would least expect it. Little red boxes of insecurity that will drive him wild for

water, will drive him out the door we have left slightly ajar on his behalf. It is much more subtle than a gun. The only problem is, if you leave the door open for the rat to go out, there is no telling what else might come in. It is one of the great rat dilemmas like all things in life.

At the entrance to the property, the family property, we have installed a gate, a great green farmer's gate chained between a great tree and a cement post. Ed installed the gate, Ed, the brother with the most to lose because of his investment in his cabin. So far we have a community of three—the old house that has been Elaine's since Mother died, the barn that Ed turned into his cabin and started this whole reunion business by making this a nice place to come to, and the woodshed, which is where we are lying in our unfinished state, listening for the rat.

So we installed the gate in early spring. We've been here on and off all summer. In July we had the reunion. And through it all has been the irritating presence of Jarvis. Jarvis the youngest next to me, Jarvis who has an unnerving way about him. Who comes up here with nothing much to do and gets annoyed because we won't stop our work and talk to him. Who keeps coming by to borrow things, things we hauled seven hundred miles to use ourselves on our cabin.

Jarvis, of course, was offended by the gate. "Who do you think you are locking out?" he says. "Why didn't anyone tell me about the gate?" Jarvis came when nobody was expecting him. Came three days early to the reunion, while Roger and I were in town getting supplies. Came pulling his pickup and camper with a Volkswagen.

There are two stories about the camper and the Volkswagen. The first one goes like this: "Halfway over the pass, the pickup threw a rod, and we had to come on the rest of the way pulling it with the Vee-Dub." This is Jarvis's story. But Jarvis has many kids. And the way they tell it, when you have one of them off in the corner pumping her for information, is this: "We pulled the camper all the way from Washington. Daddy wanted something to stake his claim with." That is, Jarvis towed this trash-heap of a pickup camper all the way from Washington state because he wanted to dump it on family land, wanted to ditch his trash in the valley of our rustic retreat, an eyesore for the deer to graze around, oxidized aluminum in the periphery of our zoom lens. And that's my brother Jarvis, grinding the gears of his Volkswagen just so we would all remember that he too is entitled.

And what do you do with a brother like that? That thinks you are out to gyp him? That measures everyone else by the standards

he sets for himself? That comes up here packing a bolt cutter—to insure his rights?

The deal with the chain has been going back and forth. It may never end. Ed put up the chain with the intention of keeping out the “uninvited.” And Jarvis saw through that, thought the chain was made just for him. To keep him off the family land. Ed made a big stink about giving him a key, then didn’t, so Jarvis comes up here unannounced and clips his way through with the bolt cutters. Then he puts on his own cheap lock in the place of the missing link, puts some ornery cheap thing in between as a link, some cheap lock it only took Ed one try to smash off. And now Ed says that Jarvis is not getting a key even if he does ask nice. But Jarvis will come through. I’m putting my money on Jarvis.

So it has been a big summer for attracting relatives. The cool weather and no mosquitoes drew them, the smog-free air and potato salad lunch, the open land and cracker pie, the old home place drew them, drew them like flies to the family reunion. In bigger numbers than ever before, in bigger campers, bigger tents, bigger families. Bigger plans for building their own cabins up here. We’ve tried to get the word out that it’s already crowded enough. But still they come to the reunion with all their plans, waving their arms in the direction of imaginary structures, and all their four-wheelers stirring up the dust. Let’s not forget about that. And all their talking around your campfire, into all hours of the night. All their teenagers sneaking in and out of the brush, darting adolescent eyes at one another across your conversation. And then there has been Jarvis and his gun.

Someone should write and tell these people that a dog is not the same thing as a kid. We have to put up with their kids, but we do not have to put up with their dogs. And dogs that are on their last legs, we especially could do without them. They are not at all inclined to be friendly even if we are related. Such a dog does not know the difference between a first cousin and a second, once or twice removed. We are all the same to him under the skin, all alien, and he sits guarding the porch, no respecter of persons, baring his teeth like he wants to take off your leg. Someone should write and tell these people. So Jarvis doesn’t have to.

Here’s the scenario. Here is cousin Wallace, young cousin Wallace coming to the reunion for the first time, for the first time since he’s been off drugs, bringing his dog, the only living being he truly loves in the whole world, bringing this dog to play frisbee with in the field. And get this. Wallace keeps a journal on the dog, keeps a journal on the best frisbee-playing dog in the world, a record of the number of frisbees thrown, and the number of frisbees caught.

Writes it all down in his frisbee book, about the dog with the 90 percent average. And another thing, the dog has cancer. He is not expected to live to the end of the year. And still one more thing, the dog especially likes to nip at Jarvis's kids. Nips at them without warning when one of them wants something obnoxious like to come in the house. (And who said dogs lack intelligence?) Jarvis gets upset at this, his little muffins being mauled by Wallace's dog. So this is what Jarvis does. Good old Jarvis. He walks up to Wallace when he's petting Buzzy—the dog's name is Buzzy—he comes up to Wallace and pulls a pearl-handled derringer out of his pocket and says, "You do something about that dog, or I will." A kind of family-reunion-make-my-day.

Good old Jarvis. About as much tact as a cement truck. I think we can predict that this will be the last we see of Wallace, as well as Buzzy. But Jarvis will still be around. He is made of sterner stuff. You couldn't knock him down with a crowbar. Or dissuade him from showing up at the reunion, not when real estate is involved. Jarvis went to real estate school. He knows the value of land. Right at first we all thought that real estate school was going to help, the lessons they give on how to attract potential buyers, the personality improvement part. We all thought it was going to help. He was nice for an awfully long time. Then he went into remission. Went back to his normal self and became the old Jarvis that we all "know and love," the good old Jarvis who comes to the reunion with a chip on his shoulder.

Jarvis who is trying to push his weight around. This is what we say about him. He is the punch line of all of our jokes. We say, "Who ate the cookies?—Jarvis." "Whose spare tire shall we roll down the hill this year?—Jarvis's." "What's the difference between an elephant and a bread box?—Jarvis." We pelt him with our verbal abuse, and still he keeps coming back for more. A little slower every year, less quick with his response, which makes us think we are wearing him down.

Of course, there are other subjects that one can bring up around Jarvis which are especially rewarding. One of them is women's rights, or women's lib, which is the term he would recognize. So Jarvis comes over to our cabin to borrow a screwdriver, and five or six two-by-fours to lay across his camper while he is repairing a leak. "Look's like she cleaned up around here since I was here before." I notice this while I'm painting around a window. "What do you mean she?" I say. "Roger did that while I was fixing the saw," the skillsaw, which coincidentally was invented by a woman. I sprinkle this information out like I am chumming fish.

"Should have known. Should have known," he says, and takes a handful of nails. He takes a handful of nails because he is building a porch for his camper, a porch out of our two-by-fours.

Jarvis is good at playing this game. It intimidates the living rat bait out of me. Makes me wonder what will still be here when I come back some time. What will be left after Jarvis comes up when we're not here and makes his rounds. Jarvis and his sticky fingers.

I say to Jarvis, "What is it exactly that you plan to do with your lot? Are you going to start a cabin this year?"

Jarvis doesn't answer immediately. There is something grinding away underneath.

"One of these days," he says.

When we talk about cabin building it is coming close to the mark. Close to the poison by the door. Ed and Elaine are the trustees for this place. They have the final say. Big brother and big sister having the final say. It rubs Jarvis raw.

"It takes more planning, more figuring, when you have to do it from scratch," he says. And then he adds, almost as an after-thought, "You had it easy."

We had it easy, me and Roger, traveling seven hundred miles just to put in a nail, seven hundred miles for two or three weeks out of the year, seven hundred miles for the last three years and still we have not replaced the roof, the roof of the old woodshed we have slowly been turning into our cabin. The galvanized steel roof that Jarvis and everyone else shot to pieces when they were boys. The roof that leaks like a sieve if we don't patch it every time we're here.

"Sure, Jarvis, everyone's got it easy," I say. "This place wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for Ed. The way I figure is that he has a right to have the say. And he does have the legal say."

This gets him where he lives. He looks off in the distance. "So you are in with them," he says.

"I'm not in with anybody. That's just the way it is." And then Jarvis begins to stretch himself, begins to flex the self-assurance I thought I was wearing down. He has one ace in the hole. He always does.

"You and Elaine got title yet?" he says, and the corners of his mouth begin to curl. And this is the ultimate weapon in the war we have been waging. Jarvis's ultimate threat. The last time this place was surveyed was shortly after Lewis and Clark. And the survey markers are old and the survey markers are gone, but Jarvis finds them. He has taught himself "surveyoring," just so that he can come up here to measure the land with his used equipment. Climbs all over the hills in front of the house with it, climbs all over the hills in back. Spends one whole reunion surveying our land. The land our

mother left to us, the whole family, in trust. The land that none of us will be able to sell until it is surveyed.

His surveying makes everyone nervous. "What are you trying to prove, Jarvis? Just what are you trying to prove?" "I'm not trying to prove anything," Jarvis says. "Just don't want to build a cabin on a piece of property unless it is mine. Just don't want to take a chance on losing it."

And here is the rub. The results of Jarvis's survey, the hold he has over all of us. Back when the place was sold, back when it was sold and resold and traded around in the family, and then sold back to the government, all but these ten acres, someone made a great mistake, some county engineer who wrote the coordinates on the title, who squared off our land from someone else's memory. Someone made a great mistake and said our property is here, when it was really supposed to be over there. They wrote it down and changed the way it had been for a hundred years. Put us down over there, thirty yards on the other side of the house, the house that has always been in this family, but is really a figment of our imagination.

And this is where he gets us, makes us all pull the covers up over our heads. "You all can go along building your pipe dreams," he says. "But just in case the Forest Service gets any notions, I'm building over there." He waves his arm in the direction of the house, indicating the other side. "And when I record the title, I will have to record it right. And that will leave you all sitting out here in thin air. I will record my cabin as being on the edge of the land, and that won't leave you on the edge of anything, because you are really on government land. I have to do it," he says. "I'm conscience bound."

And that's my brother Jarvis, squeaking his twigs in between the roof and the wall and setting all our nerves on edge. Nerves that didn't have to be set on edge. For as far as we have been concerned all these years, what the government doesn't know won't hurt them. As far as the Forest Service is concerned, this is our place, our place unless anyone goes messing around with a survey and fiddling with county records. Elaine has put it this way, "If he thinks he's going to get a title out of me, it will be over my dead body." She says. And that is the end of the story.

So there have been more than a few rats at this reunion, as Roger and I have pounded our few nails into the hollow shell of the cabin. It has been a rat reunion summer, in fact, with us lying awake listening to the gnawing going on beneath us, under our loft, the loft we have built out of pipe dreams. A pipe dream. Some drug-induced hallucination, I suppose. I've never really thought about it before—some metaphor that has lost its meaning, but has come

scratching its way back between the cracks of a new idea. It all makes perfect sense now, now that I've seen up close the beady eyes of the rat—the cabin rat standing on confident tiptoe, blinking his pink eyes and waggling his rope tail—the mountain rat who pokes his head out for just a peek from the insulation tear, before burrowing deep and safe inside our cabin walls.