

I.

## Winter Rat

You can observe a lot by watching.

—Lawrence Peter Berra

IN CENTRAL NEW YORK, there are two kinds of winter rats.

First kind: the car you drive winters only. If you can manage it. You own two vehicles, and take your so-called first vehicle off the road. So-called because snow can generally accumulate anytime between 1 November and 1 May. Which means that for six months of the year, you're driving a shitbox. And this is six months of rough winter. Few populated areas in the U.S. get the sort of snow you see around Syracuse.

Lake-effect snow: in the Tug Hill plateau, a narrow stretch of land an hour's drive to the north, as much as three hundred fifty inches a season. In Syracuse itself, as much as two hundred. In the zone between, it varies. A slight change in wind pattern can be the difference between six inches and three feet. (The record for the region, set during the 1976–77 season, is just under thirty-nine *feet*.) As kids on snowy winter mornings, we get up early and turn on the radio first thing, listen intently to hear if school will be closed due to the weather. The first closing is always Altmar-Parish-Williamstown Central, up near the Tug Hill region. But the Liverpool School District has a good bus system, rarely shuts down.

Living where we do, on the edge of the Salt City, you can expect ten feet of snow anyway each winter, what the local news networks refer to as “hard-packed snow and ice.” And slush and hail and sleet and rain. And no shortage of salt and sand to help the driving conditions. So driving a shitbox, a crate, a rat for these six months represents a real aversion to rust. A real commitment to car culture.

It's a custom the three of us can't afford. We drive my high school graduation present—a three-year-old 1969 Camaro Rally Sport with hideaway

headlights, a gift from my mother—year-round, until the accident. Then it's an endless series of shitboxes.

Like I say, winters are rough, unending, pretty only when the snow is new. And as they say, misery loves company. A kick in the ass. So an unpredictable climate is accompanied by a predictable affectation you find only in Central New Yorkers.

Weather SUCKS—worst on the planet. They have less snow in Anchorage. But it's a great place to live, FUCK YOU.

Central New Yorkers agree—the purpose of winter is to make you work to be happy. We're proud to be so happy in our misery. And to add to our miserable happiness, if not our pride: assholes who don't know how to drive in the snow.

Early morning, still dark. Barely conscious, I can hear somebody gunning an engine, then letting up, then gunning it. It's Freddy, he's stuck. Again.

Asshole.

Joey c'mon get up. Let's go.

I sit up, reach over and pull on my pants, standing. Mike is still sleeping. I stumble out into the kitchen. Pull on boots, no socks. Throw a coat on over my white tee. My father, Parliament glowing in one hand, hands me a pair of gloves. We walk downstairs, I brace myself as we walk out into the cold. The wind is blowing snow up into my glasses. My father holds his cigarette cupped in his hand. Asshole's car sits halfway into the road, halfway out of the driveway, one rear wheel spinning helplessly.

Geez. Hi Joe. Thanks.

My father puts his cigarette to his lips. We get behind and push Asshole. It takes about twenty seconds to push him through the pile of snow that the plow has left at our dead end, square in front of our so-called driveway. Sometimes the guy driving the plow understands and turns his blade, shoving the snow up and past. Sometimes he doesn't. If he doesn't, Asshole gets stuck, because Asshole babies his shitbox through the snowbank. And when Asshole gets stuck, we're stuck behind Asshole.

My father coughs a couple of times, catches his breath. Then puffs on his cigarette. Freddy drives off, sliding this way and that, the way now clear for us. I turn and stumble back upstairs, catch a little shut-eye before I have to get up.

Winters are just *made* for assholes.

Second kind of winter rat: a rat in winter.

Joe, wake up. I heard something.

Go to sleep.

We're sleeping in the same bedroom, on single beds a few feet apart. At the foot of my brother's bed sits a baby blue, beat-up dresser, with white trim. I turn over, close my eyes.

Joe—wake up, I heard something.

Go to sleep.

But I heard something.

Where?

In the closet.

You're full of shit.

You're full of shit—I heard something.

By now we're getting loud. Mike gets up, turns on the light.

Look!

What?

I saw it!

I sit up. I hear the click of a lighter. My father enters, wearing boxer shorts and socks, a Parliament in his left hand. No shirt. I'm sitting up in bed now. All three of us are in our underwear.

What's going on boys?

Mike says he saw something.

A rat!

A rat?

Dad—I saw it—a rat—it ran in the closet!

Shit. OK—get out of the way.

My father pushes my brother's bed back a bit, out of the way. Mike sits on the bed, I stand—we're both peering over his shoulder. Kneeling and reaching in, he begins, slowly, to remove each item from the closet. Three baseball bats, my metal tackle box, Mike's magic stand, my Jon Gnagy art kit. A small cloud of dust follows each item my father touches. He's using one hand, then the other, alternately holding and puffing on his cigarette. The underside of the attic steps comprises the closet's ceiling, which tapers to eight inches high at its far end.

His hands shake a bit, but not because he's nervous. He carefully inspects each box, each item. Nobody says a word, just an occasional huh, breathing.

As he nears the back of the closet, all that remains are three rolled-up posters. These I've had since childhood. I bought them mail order through an ad in the back of one of my *Famous Monsters of Filmland* mags. One poster is a full-size, garishly hued rendering of Dracula, another a similar rendering of Frankenstein's monster, the third a large black & white close-up of Lon Chaney Jr.'s head as the Wolf Man.

My father picks up the first poster, tilting it sideways. Nothing. He hands it to me, I unroll it a bit. Dracula.

He picks up the second poster, tilting it. Nothing. Hands it to me again. Frankenstein.

Is Mike dreaming?

My father pauses, puts his cigarette to his lips, and puffs, letting the smoke out with the cigarette still in his mouth. Then he leans in slowly, balancing his body on his free hand, reaching with the other to pick up the final poster. His left hand closes gently around the curve of the rolled cardboard. Gingerly, warily, he pulls the poster out of the closet, tilting it slightly toward him.

Out leaps an eight-inch-long RAT.

All three of us gasp. My father drops the poster, falling backward and smashing up against the bed, his cigarette dropping out of his mouth. Mike does a backward roll off the bed onto the floor, landing on his feet, I leap up on the dresser. The rat tears ass across the bedroom, slipping across the floor out into the kitchen. And under the stove.

Jesus-Christ-All-Mighty!

I grab one of the baseball bats my father has removed from the closet. Mike and I lace up our sneakers. My father puts on his leather shoes and a short-sleeved button shirt. We're all three of us still in our underwear.

We close the door leading to the bedrooms. We put up a barricade of boxes between the kitchen and the living room.

Mike arms himself with this two-foot-long, spring-ended shoehorn—a souvenir from the Adirondacks my father has never used, but keeps hanging on a nail in his bedroom.

Give that to me!

My father grabs the shoehorn from Mike.

I'll fix his ass.

My father turns on the stove and oven, and we wait. The oven pops slightly as it expands from the heat.

Suddenly we hear the rat moving.

Getting hot under there.

It darts out, behind the refrigerator. A moment later, it runs to the corner of the kitchen, near the entrance, behind my father's finishing box, a box full of aniline stains, lacquer sticks, putty knives, irons, sanding blocks. Sixty pounds' worth. On top of which is a stack of newspapers, grocery bags, and more tools.

We figure we've got the rat cornered now. My father tells us to stand back. I'm sitting on the counter, Mike is standing near the stove. Again, my father picks up, slowly, each item on top of the finishing box. Nothing. The final item is the box itself. My father pauses for a moment, and with some effort grabs a hold of it and swings it out of the way.

The rat is there all right—and cornered. It gets up on its hind legs and lets out a screech, leaping a full foot-and-a-half into the air at my father's face. My father jumps back, falling out of the way, and the rat tries to scamper past him. My father turns and, jerking the shoehorn up like a flyswatter, lets it down with a WHACK, catching the rat mid-back. It collapses, twitching, and my father jerks and lets the shoehorn down again. Fucking WHACK. Red spills out of the rat's mouth all over the kitchen floor.

A moment later, my father is pushing the rat onto some newspaper with the shoehorn. He takes it outside. Then he cleans up the floor with a paper towel and Windex.

South Dolores Terrace is a white working-class suburb, which is to say a lower-middle-class, fifties-style suburb, on the poor side of *Leave It to Beaver*. The three-bedroom ranch houses cost a little over fifteen grand in 1956. Only a couple of the fathers are salary workers, hold college degrees, thanks to the GI Bill. And only a couple of the mothers have any college at all.

My father has lived through the Depression, in an immigrant family with four sons. He's picked up his high school equivalency after the war, with my mother's help. He's strictly hourly, union, a union steward for a spell.

But furniture finishing has never itself been unionized. So when General Electric leaves him—or he leaves General Electric—he's left without a trade union. And ends up working for entrepreneurs. You can think of them as the bourgeoisie, if you like. Me, being the son of a French woman, I take the former term literally, and think of them as undertakers.

Boys, I've never been this poor in my life.

Then, as now, many of the poor own TV sets. They're even easier to come by than during the fifties and early sixties. My father was employed at General Electric for nearly twenty years as a touch-up man. He worked on an assembly line dogleg, fixing up nicked and damaged wood TV cabinets. Back when TV cabinets were furniture.

On 112 South Dolores Terrace, we've always got a couple of older tube units around. My father's friend, Johnny Palamino, runs a TV repair shop on the north side, and throws cabinet work my father's way. After the divorce, at 501 Raphael Ave. now and thanks to Mr. Palamino, my father always manages to find a decent used set, hooking up a good pair of rabbit ears for a so-so picture. If we're lucky, we get a color set. It usually lasts five or six months. Then we get a new used one.

During those hours my father, brother, and I spend together in front of the TV, my father chain smokes, or nearly so. Anywhere from two to five packs

a day, depending on how nervous he is. Which depends on the situation that day. Ditto for alcohol consumption. The more suspenseful the film, the more smoke, the more drink.

And at night, my father falls asleep in front of the box, volume turned down low. Sometimes, in the early morning hours, long after the channels have signed-off for the night, I get out of bed to turn off the test pattern.

Joe—whada?—leave it on!

But Dad—

DO AS I SAY, and make it snappy!

A lasting image, years prior to my reading of Orwell: my mother, light-tanned complexion and auburn hair, relaxing on the front concrete steps one sunny afternoon at 112 South Dolores Terrace, admiring her rosebushes. This is back when we still have a septic tank, when our driveway still supplies pebbles for my rock collection. Fossil days.

Suddenly my mother lets out a scream.

My father runs out of the garage to see a large rat running, in broad daylight, across the front yard. Instinctively he reaches for a garden rake—one with short, pointed steel tongs. He chases the rat across the street, rake held high over his shoulder like a madman, spiking the rat to our neighbor's lawn.

Turns out the creature had burrowed under one of the bushes along the front of our house. On Dolores Terrace, no rats permitted. The exception proves the rule.

But that rat at 501 Raphael Ave.—which locals pronounce *Ray-feel*—is really just the beginning. Or beginning's end.

For Mike, the attic becomes an arena in which to test his survival skills. As a kid, he's a tree-climber, model rocket builder, GI Joe collector, BB gun owner. Years later, it's a .357 mag, and he's an expert rock climber, hikes the Grant Teton summit without any technical gear. But at 112 South Dolores Terrace, he straps on the camouflage mock-parachute he's picked up for two bucks downtown, at the Army-Navy store on Clinton Street, and jumps off the roof of our house, hoping the chute will break his fall to earth. The hard way.

Thirty years later, he'll buy and sell government surplus—online—for a small fortune.

Crow, squirrel, raccoon haven, dark steps ascending. Moving into 501 Raphael Ave., we abandon to the attic the remains of Dolores Terrace. Sleeping, we hear noises in the walls. And in the kitchen, as luck would have it, large ants attack, depending on the season—but no roaches.

Joists left open in the attic. After the rat, we hunt around. There, my seven-hundred comic books, yellowing. Here, a suitcase full of letters, photos, drawings, clothing, cloth—from Europe, stuff my mother must have overlooked. There, a box of toys, most in pieces. We've ripped the heads off of our monster models, save them in a cardboard box as mementos—of what I don't know.

One evening, Mike and I hear a commotion. We climb up the steps together, slowly. We push open the attic door and flip it back on its hinges. A heavy wooden item. Flip it up hard or it'll flip back and drop on your head. As we peer out into the darkness, waist high into the attic, a large shadow comes swooping directly at our heads, squawking. We duck and drop down the steps, the attic door smashing over the opening.

What the hell was that?

We're trembling now—this is fun. We creep up the steps again, flip up the door. Make fast for the light bulb—pull the string, and we can see a giant crow making directly for us. We duck, it swoops over. We run back downstairs. The door smashes down again.

My father goes up, manages to open a window.

Mike has taken to buying mousetraps. Then small animal traps.

Now some of these creatures are crafty. The cheese is nibbled off the trap come morning. But Mike is craftier still.

He gets a bucket, fills it with water six inches shy of the top. Then he takes a flat stick, and leans it over the edge of the bucket, forming a sort of ramp. Next, he creates a path of cheese morsels, leading up the ramp. Finally, he dangles a cheese morsel from a string attached to the attic ceiling, dead center over the bucket and perhaps six inches from the end of the ramp.

Next morning, a dead mouse is floating in the bucket. Its small furry body tics up and twisted, a tiny bit of shit in the water.

On a Saturday morning when my father has gone on a house call, Mike and I awaken to a faint but rhythmic high-pitched PINGPING coming from the kitchen. We both get out of bed, sneaking over to the doorway that separates the bedrooms from the kitchen. PINGPING. The noise is coming from inside the top portion of the stove, under the burners. From the doorway, we can both twist our heads around the corner to peer in behind the stove. PINGPING.

Mike gives the stove a push, and a mouse darts out of it and down the gas piping, through the small chewed opening just above where the piping pokes through the drywall.

We'll get you, you sonofabitch.

The next morning we hear the PINGPING again. We sneak over to the doorway. PINGPING. I hand Mike a firecracker, he strikes a match and lights the fuse, at the last possible instant tossing it inside the stove.

BA-BAM!

The mouse, shell-shocked, nevertheless makes it back down the pipe and through the opening. When my father gets home, we tell him about it. He thinks it over for a moment.

You know, you boys should be careful blowing off firecrackers around gas piping.

That day my father decides it's best to seal up the opening, leave the other side to the rodents.

Up in the attic again, Mike sets a large mousetrap. Large enough to break your hand. One night, sleeping, we're awakened by a loud SNAP coming from above the ceiling, followed by a number of dull thuds.

The next morning, we survey the scene: there's the trap, sprung, and a few feet away is a large, black, dead squirrel, with an injury to the head. Its mouth crooked open, its teeth large and pointed. My father shakes his head.

Meeng-kya! Good work, Mike.

My father walks downstairs, comes back up a moment later with a pair of gas pliers. He grabs the squirrel with the pliers—gently, or so it seems to me—and carries it over to the half-open attic window, tossing it out with little ado. It lands on the concrete walk to what used to be the front entrance.

Months later, looking down from the attic window, one can see the skeleton of the squirrel. Years later, its faint outline still graces the concrete. Whenever we look down at it, we chuckle.

Even I get into the act a bit.

A short while after we rearrange the flat so that Mike and I can have our own bedrooms, and for several weeks, I'm noticing small bumps on my chest. They itch, and they last for a few days. And new bumps seem to appear between evening and morning.

One night, late, I'm awakened by the sensation that something is biting me. I jump up out of bed, turn on the bedroom light, and get a flashlight. Mike wakes up in the adjoining room, laughing.

What are you doin'?

Bites.

He laughs harder.

I duck under my bed, flashlight in hand, waving the beam across the floor and walls. Dust everywhere. In the corner, I notice the beam glisten on what



looks to be a cobweb. But pointing the beam directly at the web, I can just make out a small spider, crouched in the corner. I reach under the bed and swat at it, crushing the spider with the flashlight.

Now my mother always says that killing a spider is bad luck. But my first comic book as a small child, the prehistoric caveman-warrior Kona, is all about a giant spider that's been trapping T. rexes, brontosaurus, and other dinosaurs in its huge web. Ever since then, except perhaps for daddy longlegs and a few of the tinier varieties, I don't like spiders.

I notice another small web, a few feet further along the wall. Again I spot the spider, and kill it with the flashlight. A few feet more, another spider—and another dead spider. And another. And another.

That night I locate and kill sixteen spiders in all—some small, some not so small. The bumps vanish in a week.

Turning into the neighborhood late one August night, driving the Camaro, Mike and I catch a glimpse of a shadow hobbling along the front of the landlord's plumbing and heating supply company. I stop the car, back up, and pull up to the building, shining my headlights at it.

It's a large RAT, perhaps ten inches in length, perhaps eight inches in girth.

A winter rat may double as a summer rat, you see—there are rats for all seasons. You have to learn to live with such things.

We laugh it off. Or yell at each other.

We dream. Or turn on the TV. We tune in the radio, or play a record.

Whatever's available, cheap. A good horror film, say, to remind us of what we could be, animal man and woman alike. Are.

My father's father, Rosario—he learned how to laugh early on, I suspect. I imagine him, a new immigrant, muttering under his breath all sorts of funny things in Italian.

Maybe, not so funny.

But immigrant or no, he was a man, finally, in a man's world—a world where men enjoy the greater liberty of their lesser natures.

That saying of my grampa's, the one with which I begin this book—proverbially, *Chi va piano va sano e va lontano*. But it's not quite "slow and steady wins the race," as some would have it. As my grampa had it, it was more about going far—*lasting*.

And when we've finished, we brawny mortals are finished from first to last.

Meanwhile men and women will do what they have to to get by. Sometimes it's not a pretty sight. It takes gall, for one, which might or might not translate into galley's, gallows humor, Gallicisms. That's my job, *now*—second

persons come second. And truth? The truth of my labor lies less in the specific tale, adage, or idiom than in the way you work through these words, reader, these scraps of thought, to make what is real as real as real can be. Because there's nothing here that you don't already know.

Like I say, we've learned to laugh but *there's nothing funny about it. Nothing at all.*

My mother—my mother has a hard time laughing at any of this.

My mother doesn't like rats, or firecrackers, or horror films. Maybe she hurts too much. Of a German (Protestant) mother, Johanna Bentz, whose Chez Bentz features serviettes embroidered with an ornate B; of a Parisian (Catholic) father, Henri Alexandre Bourgoïn, eventual Chef des Infirmiers for the potassium mines that dot the region around Mulhouse; my mother—a French citizen by birth, born in Landau, Germany, her communion held in the French Reformed Church of Wittelsheim, a silver Huguenot cross her keepsake (a matching cross of gold her older sister Ilse's)—my mother understands the territory perhaps too well, her Alsatian adolescence marred by loss of home and hope and refugee status in one's own country, her trek-to-be from one land of salt across an ocean of saltwater to a salt city.

She spent too much time in air raid shelters, detention camps. Too much time rationing food in the Alps, while the Nazis closed in on the "free zone." And too little time at the University of Grenoble, time interrupted by the war. As a teenager on summer break in the late thirties, visiting her girlfriend near Saarbrücken, she happens upon an SS uniform hanging in a family closet.

Out on the creek, late at night, busted moonbeams.