

Bagging the Rat

By Susan Ferguson



A faintly putrid odor delivered the first hint of something amiss, but I ignored the warning. Two days earlier my husband of six years had moved out of our house, taking the gun safe and power tools from the shed we called his “Macho Room.”

The next morning I swept out his old haunt. I filled the bare shelves with bags of lawn seed and rose food and hung my rakes and shovels on the wall. I hauled in bags of potting soil and lined up small clay pots on the workbench, a row of open-mouthed chicks eager for plantings.

I stood back and admired my new gardening shed. The excitement of fresh beginnings hung in the air. But what was that smell? I spotted the most likely suspect, a tank of noxious weed killer, and quickly smothered it in two layers of plastic, sealing the seams with duct tape.

But over the next week, with each trip in and out of the shed, the stench became more insistent. Finally one day, investigating a defective circuit, I led an electrician into the garage.

“Lady, you gotta real problem in here! And I think I see the culprit...yep, right under there!” He pointed to a motionless object protruding from the shadows under the workbench.

It was a tail, frozen in a long S curve, pink and glistening in a way I knew tails should not be. Over the past week how many times had my sandaled toes come within inches of this decaying appendage? And how had this corpse remained invisible to me for so long, when a stranger had spotted him instantly?

“Do you do rodent disposal?” I asked, trying to muffle the desperation.

“Not my line of work ma’am.”

I had no better luck with my ex on the phone that night. “Judging from the smell,” I argued, “he must have died a while back...on your shift.”

My ex gave a loud guffaw. “Too bad I’m leaving town tomorrow. But if the big guy is still there next week, I’ll take him out for you.” A seemingly generous offer, but fumes from the shed told me this was a job that could not wait.

Next I turned to my twenty-year-old son, who is six foot two and built like a quarterback. Though he now lived in a college dorm across town, he certainly could come over and haul this abomination out of the garage for me. After all, hadn't he been raised in this house? Didn't his filial duty include rescuing his mother from such horrors? Clearly the business of rodent disposal fell squarely in the category of male chores. Shouldn't men—*real* men, I argued—want to protect the women in their lives from such vile realities? My son's bemused response to all of this logic: "I don't *think* so, Mom!"

And so it was that I finally faced the inevitable: that rat was mine, a sickening symbol of all manner of vermin I would have to handle on my own in my newly uncoupled state.

One look at the nearly foot-long tail told me this was no ordinary rodent. I tried to picture what remained hidden in the shadows attached to the gargantuan tail, fearing an equally monstrous body with oversized claws and piercing eyes. But my mental sketch was no more helpful than a chalk outline at a murder scene, remaining stubbornly void of details. And even if I could conjure up an image of the once mighty rat-that-was, how could I imagine what weeks of decomposition had done to his form? My memories from National Geographic of fallen and bloodied prey stretched out on the Serengeti plains were no match for this rotting horror in my new garden shed.

Abandoning visualization, I turned to find the proper *equipment* to get the job done. Hadn't I at least learned this much from all the men in my life - no job is too hard if you just have the right tools - which in their case meant rotary drills, electric saws and cordless routers, but in my case meant a can or two of Lysol and the dog's pooper scooper.

As I sprayed my way into the now reeking shed, I had every body part covered; arms encased in elbow-high gloves, bandanna over my nose and mouth, hair tucked into a hat, and toes safe inside my steel reinforced hiking boots. If I only had a six foot extension on the scooper I could perform the entire operation standing outside the door!

As I inched my way across the shed, I took my second look at the protruding tail. I discovered that the rat had had the courtesy to end his life on a long board lying under the workbench. He already lay on a portable stretcher!

With newfound courage I reached down and grabbed the closest end of the splintered plank. Feeling the weight of its occupant, I carefully lifted the litter over a bag of potting soil and carried it out into the bright sunlight with outstretched arms. I managed the entire maneuver without once glancing at my silent passenger riding atop the board, tail no doubt dangling off the side.

Out in the bright light I knew it was time. I took a deep breath, looked skyward and then braced myself as I shot a quick glance down.

My rat was large but not hideous. What caught my eye in that split second was his soft underbelly. So similar to my puppy's warm underside I had caressed only moments earlier. Suddenly images of all the pets I'd ever loved or held came back to me and I realized that this rat belonged in the long lineup of God's creatures.

I wish I could say I stood gazing into my rat's furry face for hours, but my epiphany lasted only a second, just as long as my nerve. I also wish I could report that I gave my rat a proper burial. But with the trance over, I chose the quickest interment available.

Cautiously I lifted the plank and tilted it downward into a trash bag held open by my gloved hand, careful to keep my eyes at a safe distance above the sliding form. I heard the soft thud at my feet and twisted the black plastic neck into a tight knot.

Carefully, I laid the precious bundle on top of other bags of garbage and secured the lid of the can. I bid a silent farewell to my departed guest and wondered if he had been frightened in his final moments alone in the dark corner of my shed.

Walking into the house, I stripped off my protective gear and sat down. To start my new life I would have to face some horrid truths from my past, along with bitter emotions and a sense of failure that threatened to engulf me. If I tried to ignore them, I would only choke on their toxic fumes; each new endeavor would be tainted by their festering presence.

Perhaps my monsters would prove to be no more hideous than my rat, with soft underbellies of their own. Perhaps I would not be struck blind after all by taking a closer look.

I had bagged my first rat. I was ready for the next.

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