

# Singing the Fat Man

by  
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When they burnt Rodney: One I knew they were scanning me. Tight. Like a coating in my throat. Like skin over bones. Like the Fat Man's thick sausages pressing into my neck tendons, not hard like, but persistent, constant, *moist*.

"Higgily piggily, Rodney, for goodness, gosh sakes," wetly he says, drip, drip, dripping of sewer walls, "I need a little favour."

Flesh, mounds of it, moved beneath, rocked like a boat I was, anchored by that damp, greasy grasp, a doll, Fat Man's doll on his knee. I stayed zipped -- except for squeaking a bit.

"There's a leaky pipe, my boy." Shivers and shakes: laughing. "I need a filter." Stroking the back of my head gently, lightly, soft touching finger tips, lap dogging me, then stuck them fingers in his maw, sucking busily and noisily on the meat to hint me.

Scooped and pan fried, Rodney: One was.

I am Rodney: Two.

His number one Joey in sight, behind, round the Fat Man. I had evil in my pocket, that weighed heavy and stone like, rock hard rock to smash against blubbering meat. But the Joey: One full of evil and ready to do the Devil's work. Bang, bang, bang went my evil against my thigh as the Fat Man shook, shook, shook.

I remembered Rodney: One.

I let it bang.

"Tiddley piddley, boy, tiddley piddley. What do you say. Are we on, ok?"

Just a Fat man, asking a Fat question. A man who loves his food, and some friends who love him as he devours them like his food, Joey friends, who keep funny notes and run funny errands, who have friends too, Billys and Daveys and Lillys all, who have friends again and again and so forth, etcetera, till there's no knowing where an idea came from except to guess somewhere near the street where it happened. Where things (surprise, surprise!) happen the way the Fat man wants. But it isn't the tangle it seems, only means to look that way.

Me squirming: "Let me down, Fat, ok? Pleeese?"

"Come, come, now," laughing Santa Claus. "I need an answer."

Stroking, wetly probing clammy fingers touching. "You wouldn't want old Fat to worry? And I could be *ever* so grateful. *Ever* so grateful," repeating to a dumb Rodney, so he sees, see? Dumb Rodney me.

But I ain't so dumb, sometimes. "Favours, favours. What's a favour?" says I. "Like you want that Rodney covers the paper route?"

Laughter, big and rolling, a barrel on a runway. "*HO HO HO! HE HE HE!*" Shaking he shakes me.

"No, ho ho ho," smaller barrel, "Oh no. Joey does that just fine and dandy. Fine an dandy, don't you Joey?" Melon head swinging round.

Squirming to see past the mountain of meat, behind to the thin hungry figure, but nothing (too late?), no motion, or maybe a dark shrug. But Joey eyes like dying coals for me. Evil for me. Why does Fat tell me Joey does the route? Knowing is danger: too much knowing is death. Shouldn't have looked at Joey:One. I *am* dumb. Fat's shaking me other ways, too, I know.

"Grateful?" I say to keep the uneasy sea rolling.

Smile large as a canyon, dark deep abyss, no bottom. And movement. Not large. Little, small shift. But I know it. He knows Rodney knows it. Any Rat would. And me, not your average Rat, knows it too much.

"Silly Billy. Grateful is the word, yessss," ssssing like a snake, hand on my shoulder now, resting, not measuring, feeling, weighing. Friendly like. "Oh gosh, yes! My yes!" Leaning over, too close, lips dripping into an ear I shouldn't move, whispering wetly, sadly, "Who to trust? Who is selling out old fat?" Then, closer: "Wherever might I find a new Joey? Hm? Wherever?" But loud enough so Joey:One behind can capture it, too close to my Rodney:Two ear so I can't see him digging it behind Fat's melon. I hear Joey:One shift his weight. Adjust his gear. Things like that, I hear things.

"Joey? A leaky pipe?" I whisper, softly, softly, hoping Joey ears don't hear, wondering at Fat's game. Someone turning the trick on Fat, selling him down and out. And me a Rodney rat, to snuffle through his garbage and find him out.

"Oh ho! No, no!" He laughs and his flesh flows and ebbs.

"Joey:One here is a good boy. A nice boy. He'd never blab on old Fat," lip smacking, wetting wetly with tongue. "He'll give it to you straight."

Three Joeys there are.

So I say, "Joey:Two?"

The melon bobs, like on a thick, flat metal spring.

"And :Three?"

Nods again. Looking behind his pie eyes, the promise hangs between us, a thick-linked heavy chain, pulling our heads closer, me actually thinking about working for Fat permanent-like: freelance no more, me a new Joey (number unknown?) while the old leaky Joey: pipe is plugged up,

disappearing like he never was and never will be.

"Dear, dear!" A rush of dank air, a sigh, a sigh. "Oh my! Poor old Fat! What am I to do? Who else could it be, who else? My, my, my." Leaning over again, conspiratorial like. "You just run a little filter, yes, a little scan on Joeys(:Two and :Three). I want to know who's a nice boy and who isn't. It won't do to have naughty children, oh no!"

Tight scan on Joey(:Two and :Three). And if they come to know ....

No choice, I know, no none. Ask Rodney:One. Who I now know, some time ago, had this same talk with Fat.

So I nod ok, scared, but not showing, and thinking about me, a dumb Rodney, being Fat's Joey, if I don't get burned, and go on nodding like a dumb Rodney till the Fat Man stretches out his lumpy leg and I slip down the slide of flesh to the floor.

Only one Fat Man, there is.

Later, when I can know again, Joey:One has me somewhere outside, upside, clicks from where he dug me up before, and hustling, bustling, bumping, pushing me, while I think, think, think, and try to ignore my evil.

"Here."

Into my hand slides a set of addresses. Good numbers. Clobbering numbers. Numbers to make it easier to put hooks into :Two and :Three. Joeys that is. I could probably do it without, but I ain't telling. But lots easier, anyway.

I turn and look at Joey's face, dark cloud warning, an angry horizon, thin where the Fat Man's is round and full.

"Rats should stay underground." Voice like a knife of ice. Like I'm a dumb Rodney again. "I don't like Rats." Push and twist and I stumble away, Joey:One at my back, hearing him finger his evil, but muffled sound in his pocket, only in his pocket. So mine stays put, waiting for the sound, waiting.

But it doesn't come, and I have my skin still -- and Joey:One brought me here.

He is too shook to fry me?

Or Fat is playing him too?

Or he is playing Fat playing him?

Naw, to the last -- he's a dumb Joey.

Or a very good Joey.

Me a Joey?

Too many thinks.

And when I turn round, Joey:One is gone -- only dying trees and shadow buildings on a dark tumble street I don't know, the sounds of scurrying under gutter garbage tickle my ears with the clicking of tiny claws.

Find a hole, I keep thinking, a nice safe hidey-hole, a warm dry nest full of happy things, cuddly things. I gotta hole nobody knows, not even Fat. I think. Good idea I keep saying to myself, but I know when I come out for

air, and I'm going to have to sooner or later ... well, you can't fool the Fat Man.

So Up I go to do his work.

To do Fat's job I need the BIG machine. The connected machine. So I need to go on the Up. TomDickandHarry who work the BIG machine dig Rats like me hanging round. Like status or something. Like they wished they were Rats, but they're too scared of tunnels, too scared of traps that will fry them clean down to the bone, too scared, maybe, of stuff they shouldn't be knowing, or each other, or maybe what they might find out about themselves. Anyway, I make the call.

"Hi. Todd there?"

"I'm sorry, he's out of his office at the moment. May I take a message?"

"Sure. Could you tell him Jerome called, and that I'll be at the Cafe at five?"

"Ok. Jerome called, cafe at five, right?"

"Right. Thanks. Bye."

"Bye."

Then I giggle in the dark, like always, cause the voice is not mine, but Homer's I mined and refined from an old show when I was a kid. Then stop giggling when I remember howcum I called, the shadow of Fat weighing down on me.

Later, when I watch Todd drift by the scan, all angles and elbows, lanky and tweed, going into the place, I really go Up, like right Up, and into that box like I belong to it and it belongs to me. And I shiver inside stepping up to the door when I think, maybe it will, just maybe it will, when I'm a Joey.

When I'm a *Joey*.

"Hey, Todd!"

"Jerome, good to see you," he says, not knowing my Rodney, cause he's a Todd double d and on the Up side where they all think their names are their own. "How've you been, man? It's been months since I've heard from you."

"Good. How about you, man? How are things in academe?" I say cause that's what he waiting for, what he has ears to hear for.

"Not bad," he says, smiling his *I'm important* smile. "I got my grant."

I know this already, knew before he did cause I unravelled it: expedited it, as ole Toddy might say, gave him his plum, with a bit o' bit twiddling on one of my favourite lines. But act surprised anyway: "Great! That mean you're staying at the College then?"

"You bet. I'm in there for the duration. I'll tell you," he lowers his voice, and gets close like, "now I can really do what I want with my project."

"Glad to hear I'm not going to lose another friend to the Corpse." That's the way they say it, TomDickandHarry, like with an e on the end,

when they look up with little nervous eyes at the ice towers in the skies. Do they giggle, too, in their florescence, like us Rats in the dark?

"Naw," he says leaning back, working the salt shaker to keep his busy hands busy. "I'm really not cut out for the real world. This is where I belong."

"You'd only be wasted there anyway," I say, cause he wants to hear that, listening to it inside my head in my Goober voice, so I can swallow it though it tastes like stone.

But instead of thanks says, "You're right," uncertain smile around it, running tongue over lips, tasting the change, almost believing himself, surprising me. Be careful, I think, don't give him too much line or he'll try to cut me free. Or strangle himself. An ambitious TomDickandHarry associate might unwind him.

I nod, anyway, cause I can't think of what else, and he says, "So what have you been up to lately?" making me a happy Rodny.

"I've been working on some really interesting stuff. You might want to take a look sometime."

He nods, and a smile turns the corners of his mouth, a smile full of knowing, plain for anyone to see, and inside I think to me: hope no one's watching. But I doubt it. He's a TomDickandHarry and there's no getting around it. "Listen, I've got the whole weekend pretty well free. How'd you like to drop by the lab and we can have a look at some of your *stuff*."

Wince so hard it almost shows on the outside, but plug the crack and smile anyway, somehow, and nod "Ok, sounds good to me," and talk of time, place, of other things, anything, but no more cracks, no, not here, for Fat, or another Rat, or anyone who might be watching, to see.

So, anyway, there's Mother.

Big and grey and cold.

Furious little particles tickling her cold heart. In almost silence. Up boys can't hear it. But I can hear: singing to me of Fat and Joeys and Pipes and Filters. Veins spilling out all over. Spaghetti lines, allover everywhere, like no one cares or knows, or could know, where they go, what they say, when they say, who they say. Cause they can't hear like I can.

And there's Todd, smiling his Todd smile, little Todd eyes on my box of tricks.

So I give him a new toy, and he jacks in on one deck, me on another, making Momma sing for him, slipping something nice and soft into her so she hardly feels it. She knows me, knows my touch, from the before times.

*Hello.*

Hi, I say back.

*How are you Rodny?* she asks.

Ok, I say.

*Who's your friend?*

You know him, Momma. That's Toddy.

*Oh. (Disappointment?) What's he doing?*

I've brought some tricks for Toddy, Momma. Can you play with him for a while?

*I'd rather play with my Rodny.*

Later, Momma. I've business.

*Later?*

Later.

*You don't know how later later is Rodny honey.*

I don't say anything, cause I don't know what to say when she says stuff like that, but in a sec, like usual, she says, *Ok*, making it a sigh through my skin.

Momma sees Todd is busy, playing with her and with my Sim-Rodny, so I get busy too, running through the spaghetti, setting free happy little animals that skip and tumble back to my home, so I can visit Momma from a safe hidey-hole, on the outside, for a while anyway.

Todd glances over from his playtime, grin faced, so I grin back to think him I'm playing with him and not with the spaghetti, and his thumb goes up.

Yeah, I think: thumbs up.

Back in my hidey-hole I do some B & E.

*Hi, Momma*, I wave as I scoot by, sliding along strands of spaghetti.

*Hi, Rodny* she says, and starts to say something else about Toddy but I've gone by. Hold on, Momma, I think, cause I know I'm gonna need you if I run into eeevil.

Pretty soon I'm sliding along other spaghetti: Registrar's Office. Lots of spaghetti here. Sloppy. But nothing much to see. Zip and I'm through to Physical Plant, stop to drop the temp in Todd's office for fun, then skipjump through the NET to Dr. Physics in the Material's Lab, and settle back to wait for my Hook. It's 10:55.

11:00.

Line's up, just like every night, like the next tick on the clock, and I'm in.

Thank you, Hook, whoever.

And as Dr. Physics and he make chat, I sneak into Hook's grey matter, with its so ver-r-r-y interesting Big Brother agency connections, and begin to do my damage, to play with the Joey address, snuffling along dark tunnels, digging at dank holes, scratching through garbage, sifting, sorting, gathering. Like only a Rat can. Staying Rat scared like I haven't been in a long long long, little heart beating double time quick, watching, watching, watching, for a Rat trap.

Then I find what I want, a place where I can sink my teeth from the outside, and scurry out of there as fast as my little Rat legs will take me,

scared of Joey(:two and :three)'s eevil, so scared I almost bump into Dr. Physics as I shoot by, scooping up my droppings as I go along, so no one can sniff me back to my happy hidey-hole.

What I see for Joey:Two:

Nice box, a thought, sliding the thin line in, finding the weak link, the key, looking over his hidey-hole for places to put in my own filters. Some good work here (done by a Rat), but old, years too old, lots of slack to play with. Unless ... unless. There's always the Unless. Unless it only looks old to put a Rat's mind at ease, to let him to scurry into holes which disappear behind him, and tunnels that close up like tighter than a boxer's fist. But the sim-board is green, I see, and I'm in the know -- as much as anyone since Rodney:One got fried. So I dig into the main circuits, all cold and steel with no feeling: simple, brutal, efficient. Like Joey:Two.

Joey:Two:

Nasty Rasty name of Sully FitzPatrick. Sully. I wonder if he likes Joey better? I see what he's been up to. His stuff is happy to talk to my tricks. The important stuff isn't there, only small time trash. I know him from a bit of nasty badness before which doesn't show at all. He'd be a dumb Joey to leave it there. I knew it wouldn't be that easy. So I file tidbits, and decide to sit on him, sick my watchwatch dog on his, and double watch to see if he's been yapping. You been blabbing on Fat you bad Joey?

Joey:Three:

Painted silks, bamboo bird cages, rice paper screens, delicate teak furniture, small silver bells, incense. Code like that too. Great swirling ideographs, tinkling sounds, long-necked long-legged birds flapping off the surface of lily ponds, many chambered house of deceptive size. But under its ornamental oriental surface is a hard and polished knot, like a knot of wood. This is him: subtle and calculating, surface calm and placid, reflecting outside but showing nothing of its inside, its undercurrents, its movements. I don't know the code, but I've seen similar once before and know how to swim through it now: sideways, on your back, in a large slow spiral, but never, never, straight to where you want to go. Slow, oh so slow, patience.

And when I get there (my lazy strokes almost stroke me past before I know I'm there) I leave watchdogs again, but this time they're more bird like, long lanky birds that flap through and back to me like symbols, leaving only a little ripple on the surface, the memory of a feather.

Waiting time now. Nothing to do. Bug in my ear, waiting for noise, for Joey(:Two and :Three) to light up my board. Waiting for them to step into the pit. Everywhere they go, every place they see, I am with them too, a guardian angel, me. Their stuff watches them, guards them, all the time from their hidey holes; only I am along for the ride now too.

So I can curl up and sleep, and let my watchdogs watch, snarling to me if anything interesting happens, and dream the dreams of a Joey to be, full of possibility and fear.

Fat towers above, a wall of flesh. "Pooh Beary berry," wriggling worm fingers crawl on my back, "Come now, see now: you wouldn't lie to old uncle Fat would you?"

Little Rodney head swinging No, Oh No: something that couldn't be thought in such a small space.

"Nothing at all my dear dear boy?" worms working inside collar, while my Rat head goes a spinning No No No.

Hook is inside my shirt, choking poor dumb Rodney, pulling, lifting, off the floor, up at The Fat Man's round face. "Are you absolutely positively positive," he asks, like he wants to know if I'm sure I made that croquet stroke, old boy.

"H..o..n..e..s..t.....F..a..t," my own voice hissing, whispering, squeaking out, slow like, wheezing old through shirt constricted larynx, Fat becoming a big blurry blob through my bulging teared with sweat poor eyes, the room turning on a slow uneven tilt.

Then, distant words through buzzing ears: "Ok, Rodney. I believe you."

I'm a pile of rags on the ground. Lumbering, unhappy mountain of flesh waddling back to his throne: a big special chair that I'd have to scramble up to reach its seat on which four Rodnys could stand side by each. I think a thought, all sweat and shaking and fear, what I've wondered before, but shouldn't wondering now.

Why Fat? Why so big big big? I should be thinking fear and alarm, running, dodging and hiding, but instead I watch: heaving tossing pile of flesh, dragging down down down dragging. What do you need to be so big for? What could make a man want to be so big Big BIG? Funny time for this unhappy thought when I should be worried for my own little shape, but there it is, small grey animal snuffling inside my head it won't go away. So I watch fat, sad Fat: Why Fat, why?

And then, for a sec, I know why the little animal is there: just a flash, an afterimage of a light that wasn't there, I can see through his sitting there unhappy face a pouting little boy, his friends making fun of him, a sad little fat boy: Fat. Then it is gone, and he is the Big Fat again.

"Come here, Rodney."

Slowly, crawlingly pick myself up, edge closer, sucking in quieter ragged breaths, feeling not seeing red marks on my neck, watching the wormy fingers still upon his sack of thighs. There's no Joey there behind him now, but Fat has his own ways of evil: you can't fool The Fat Man.

"Closer ..."

So I go.

"Now turn around."



When I make uncertain motion, he smiles his Fat smile: "It's Ok." And it is, I know knowing, so I turn around beside his throne, so I can't see him, except for black balloon trousers and huge leather circus shoes stretched past me like small boats.

"I'm tired Rodney, tired," he wheezes, tired sounding but a big tired, not like my small tired. "I cannot conduct business properly if I don't know who my friends are. You're my friend, aren't you Rodney? Yes, I know you are," me imagining him smiling a big fat tired smile on lips wide across as my hands.

"I'm a lucky man, Rodney, a lucky man. I've many friends like you who all want to help me. And you are going to help me still, aren't you?"

I nod. "Sure." But the words don't even convince me.

For a time, quiet. Then, all of a sudden, from where it comes I don't know: "My dear dear Rodney. Things aren't always as they seem. Like this room, Rodney. We are not alone. Oh no, not at all. Why even old Fat isn't sure how many eyes are watching and ears listening. Joey: One's back there watching and pacing, watching and pacing (itching to do you, you know?), and another's watching him (Oh yes, Joey, don't think you're alone either), and who watches behind? And behind that? These walls. An infinity of watchers watching." Breeze as his meaty wormy hands wheel out behind to his sides: and there I see what he's talking about: mirrors, though in the gloom I didn't know before, not in this light, thinking the dark darting shadows something else and not us. Mirrors on all the walls, reflecting darkness. It is a small room, I know now, much smaller, I think, than I thought -- or maybe not.

"And I watch you dear Rodney, watching me. What's behind our eyes, eh? There's just no telling anymore." A gentle wind tousling my hair, warm and moist: Fat's sigh.

Quiet again, and his hand is there, covering my Rat head, a comfortable old hat, resting lightly above, stroking gently stroking, scRatching a Rat the way he likes to be scRatched, behind his ears, mind underneath thinking NO NO NO RUN RUN RUN but sighing my own sighs, shivering but not from scared, or at least I don't think so. But from excitement, drifting as long as I can, happy like, under the great wide warmth of The Fat Man's touch, brushing away my scared.

So I go back to work for him, and I don't know why: I know I could cut and run and he'd probably leave me be. He hasn't told and I didn't ask. Sure, I want to be a Joey still, but it's, well, something else now. Like there's this thing between us, big and sad, that makes me want to help old Fat, find his bad Joey that's been piping, and close that pipe down on that bad bad boy. And not so scared now, no not at all. Still scared sensible, but a Joey scared not a Rodney scared, in right balance.

Bored watching. Board watching.

I put extra sneaks on Joeys(:Two and :Three), but they still say the same thing: not a pip anywhere, anywhen. I sit in my Rat hole, waiting for the thing to happen.

But what happens is a big nothing.

I watch the Joeys as they go out and walk about. I watch crimes, but crimes for Fat. A movement of a Joey hand, a nod of a head, and the motion spreads out to become exaggerated, to grow into a quickly turned blade, a swift exchange of envelopes, a transaction duly recorded, electronic digits tumbling into place, people moving in and around and about, motion centred on the Joey. Elegant, efficient, an intricate waltz -- the subtlest gesture, a single note, sets the dancers whirling in motion.

My files are large now, and grow every day as the dance proceeds.

I know past knowing the Joey lives; I see Fat's movements each day as his little Joey's trickle down to their lesser names the ideas that move and turn things. Joey jobs -- watching learning -- now I know why fat wanted me to be a Joey, he'll need a new one, soon, and who'll know better than me what he does. I'm watching them now, and hoping to learn the things not to do, another valuable lesson courtesy of the Fat Man.

Why is no one blabbing? Could I have missed something?

No.

Above the world moves and hisses along, Fat's fat fingers moving round and round stirring this pot and that, putting the scare into this him and her. And everyone knows when he is an unhappy Fat, because his unhappiness spreads out like an echo in the sewer, back and forth, forth and back, through empty chambers, bouncing round corners and running down long dark corridors, till it comes back to where I sit, a thousand different smaller voices all crying his unhappiness.

And still I sit in my hidey hole, watching my own nest come unravelled while I do nothing but Fat's business, betting my nest stuff against a Joey job.

Something happened. The day Joey:One rattled me, I began to think bad thoughts.

This is when it happened:

"Nothing?"

I shook my Rat head, every sound of his making little hairs go up on the back of my neck.

"You're lying," with a reach into his pocket, tendons in arm talking.

"No," shaking my head still, like it isn't mine no more, shaking it so much that's all I do now the whole time I see Joey:One. But my hand's still mine, curled round my own evil, before Joey:One even touched his. He knows this, too, disappearing tendons.

"Did you know they dusted Coulter yesterday? She was holding a big load, I mean the biggest. They knew when they dusted her that it was the jackpot. And :Two and :Three knew, cause Fat told 'em, just them and no

one else." He looks evil my way, and says, righteous like, "Fat didn't tell me," like its a sign of trust, an act of faith, Fat not telling him so everyone knows he couldn't be the blabber, which makes me smile inside.

A think comes into my head and I ask "When," though I know the answer already.

"When what?"

"When did Fat tell them."

"Two days ago."

I say "No," again, the only word I ever say to Joey:One, my head still no no noing.

"No?"

"They haven't peeped since then. Not one word. I've watched and listened and followed everywhere, everywhen, awake, asleep, inside, out: No. Not them." Saying it, and knowing it at once, like it's just come to me, like a switch just turned, cause I didn't stop to think before, so I say it again: "No. They didn't."

Joey:One shrugs an I don't care, and says "You missed something, or they fooled you," but I know I didn't and I wasn't. Joey:One doesn't care cause he's only worried about his own Joey skin. But now I think again: No. Not them: who, who can it be then? Of a sudden, dumb dumb Rodney that I am, I get scared, real scared, that Joey:One here might be thinking the same think, thinking I mean him maybe if not them (who else?), but he's still a dumb Joey and doesn't see it -- I think. I shrug a Maybe when I know there isn't one, and look like Ok, maybe, maybe they fooled me, when I know they didn't, cause I don't want him thinking his evil thoughts about me, thinking I shouldn't see Fat again to tell him my nothing, nothing that might mean something bad for Joey:One.

But Joey:One's thinking elsewhere, thinking how he's the one Fat trusts, yeah, his happy boy, his Joey, and me watching his face real close, remembering his face a minute ago, but seeing nothing like I should have seen if he was the one blabbing when I said my nothing to him. Unless he's Rat like, and doesn't let it show. But he is a dumb Joey, I think again: too dumb to be blabbing.

"Fat ain't going to be happy. You know that Rodney," looking like he can see Fat dangling me again, grinning the thought.

I shrug back at him, not caring as long as he doesn't think the thought. "Ok. I've got some other stuff I'll put on them," I say, even though I've already used my best stuff, but wanting Joey:One to think as happy thoughts as he can about dumb Rodney.

"I don't know why Fat wastes his time ..." shaking head side to side, side to side, me thinking the same thought, and others, lotsa others, waiting for Joey:One to leave, so I can do some real thinking.

When Joey:One is gone I wonder: who? Not Joey:Two. Not Joey:Three. No. I know with all knowing now. One? No, I think he's just a

dumb Joey, but, better to take care, I decide to check anyway, hoping in a funny way that he's the one, scared if he is he'll have to do me now, but even more scared, still, if he isn't ....

Rat droppings.

At first I thought it was a Rat trap: I'd seen plenty before, but know them all. So I cut out quick as I could from watching Joey:One, tail between my legs, scurrying for cover. Then, when the panic goes out, and my little Rodney heart beats normal once more from safe and warm in my hole, I bring it back into my imagining think it again: was it a trap? Puzzle enters my head, cause it didn't look like any of the other traps: a bad patch looking like a lazy maintenance job, kind of thing a Rat loves to sink his teeth into ... which shuts clank clank around him steel jawed teeth. Ok, I think, going back for another look won't hurt, couldn't hurt, as long as I don't touch.

Going back I see it is not a Rat trap at all, but Rat droppings instead. Stuff another Rat left when he heard me bump bump bumping along. Stuff he left from when he was watching Rodney:One. A Rat. And now I'm not sure what to do: who should be ratting on Joey:One.

Me.

And only me.

Then a thought comes sneaking in.

I check, careful oh so carefully, Joey(:Two and :Three), but this time not using the addresses Joey:One gave me but my own, keys collected not to use (too scary to use) but to have, just because having is something. Only now I use them. I check stuff I shoulda checked long before but didn't, cause who would Rat on a Joey except a crazy Rat? And I begin to smell something I don't like at all: other Rats, two, maybe three, circling, circling, watching, waiting. Each Joey with two Rats sunk into him -- except for Joey:One, with three little Rats slinking round him. Three Rats.

Two, if I had not decided to rat him too. Two on each Joey.

Symmetry I don't like. Unnatural, unlikely symmetry. Unhappy symmetry.

Everything is coming unwound.

Buzz wink, and everything fell apart.

It buzzed and buzzed and buzzed, buzz buzzing, a bee I couldn't get outta my head, when it had never peeped before. Sitting in my hidey hole, watching it buzz, watching the little red eye wink wink wink, ten times, twenty times, thirty times, more. Buzz wink buzz wink buzz wink buzz wink

...

Address no one has, a number no one can get, a Rat's biggest secret, waiting for connect.

Not by mistake, not by chance, but ringing all the same.

One hundred and still counting.

They know.

I cover my little Rat ears and close my eyes, but still it buzz-winks there.

So I do what I must (what else can I do?) though I know things will never be the same.

I open into the circuit.

*Hello, Joey*, says Mothers voice just like it sounds when I jack straight in, real pleasant like. *How have you been?*

And when I don't say something: *"Why don't you talk to me anymore Joey?"*

Joey?

"No, no, Momma, it's only Rodny, little Rodny ..."

*Oh. Pause. Are you sure?*

"Yeah, Momma, I'm sure," but thinking, all the same, maybe not so sure.

*Whatever you say Joey darling.*

"Rod ...." I start to say back, but she just talks on:

*Toddy asked me to call. He'd like to talk to you.*

"Toddy?" I ask of nothing, of a dead circuit, of silence. "Toddy," I say again, but to emptiness, to void, like nothing was ever there, like it never rang, like it never happened.

I sit there, too stupid to move, waiting and listening, but nothing more comes. When I go to unplug I see my hand like something apart, a frightened small animal, shaking, thinking maybe it should be in a little cage somewhere, can't help it, shaking.

What is happening?

Bohemian Cafe.

Warm, moist night. Like underneath Fat's arm. Like inside the box, only this time I don't know what's there, who's waiting for me. My hand on the door knob, leaving print of wetness and fear.

"Hi Jerome," from a spot near the door, not the usual table, but smelling of something different. This time Todd has the seat, so I only nod, waiting to see what's what, shoving hands into pockets so he can't see the small unhappy animals they've become. "Sit down," sweeping gesture to empty seat (me remembering Fat's great hands motion), generous like, welcoming, promising happy things and play time.

Slouch like into the chair, the only way to sit with hands in pockets, looking at Todd new, looking at new Todd, watching him he knows my hands, restless in my pockets, knows their fear. Smile, he does, like he too much enjoys this.

"So," I say, and know it is wrong, know the change now, have lost it, can see it in the Todd face.

"Jerome," (smile smile) "we'd like to thank you for your help," just like that, no pretending, no masks, no front or back, simple, plain, edge hard: we. We?

"Fat's going down, boyo. The big slide. No way back up. No small thanks to you" (wink this time). "With what you got us on his Joey's we think we'll be able to persuade him to be more, ah, *co-operative*, shall we say."

Tightening caught in my throat like a thick rope: Toddy the Corporate Cat, I think, losing it, room moving, head full of swirling whirling moistness (can he see me swaying as the room turns round and round?), a Rat, small and scared and lost.

"We're very happy with what you've dug up so far, and we'd like to show our gratitude. But your loyalties, are, to say the least, somewhat suspect ...."

I am caught, feeling the trap's steel bar across my broken spine, tail lashing, frothing mouth, anger, scared, then anger, crying, dumb dumb dumb Rodney, dropped into Todd's mouth, between rows of nasty white smiling teeth.

"But if you continue to help us, well, we can be grateful," hearing the words (again?) (before?) (when?), different place, different time, but who will be grateful? Rodney caught in a trap, shivering and crying: *Mother, how could you?*

"We want you to rat on Fat for us."

"Fat?" Stupid words, feeling my forehead moist and gleaming, feeling it under my arms and on my back, shivering it out, shaking out loud now up from my shaking hands ... wet ... knowing I'm being scanned ... can't stop sweating though ... (Fat?) ... breaking my Rat coolness ... the more knowing it the more losing it, like I'd stepped beyond and couldn't find my way back.

"Yeah, Fat."

I can't. No, let them do me. Can't.

"Well, what do say?"

Head shaking, back and forth, No, No, No, but sounds don't come out.

Todd shrug: "Ok. But Fat isn't going to be happy about the ratting you've done on his Joeys."

No. No. No.

"That's too bad. We could use someone with your talents, Jerome. And it doesn't have to stop with Fat. There are a number of other interesting projects on which we'd like to bring you in from time to time. On a contract basis, say. In the future there'll be plenty of opportunities for a mutually beneficial relationship."

No.

"Think about it, Jerome. With your help, he'll be out permanent. One way ticket. No one to bother Rodney anymore. And nice comfy place for you, Jerome -- and some tricks into the bargain."

It's cold, cold like the shivering space between the emptiness, beneath the shadow of the corpse that'll fall across Fat.

"Jerome?"

Stumbling, falling out of the chair, keeping my hands in pockets still, I don't own them anymore, arms against stained dripping sides, trickle of fear running down jaw line, backing away, away, away, someone else, not me, squeaking something I can't hear over thump thump thumping of my little Rat heart, running out, banging through the door into the quiet street, curious stares, chased down the street, stumble running.

Who squeaked? Me? Could it have been my voice, my word, that last sound, my "Ok"?

Ratting Fat.

Rat to Corporate Cat.

Hands shaking, new beads of fear, crown of diamonds on my forehead, and I think it again: ratting on Fat.

You can't fool The Fat Man.

Hands, trembling hands, hold addresses I must use. I have no choice. No way out.

So I jack into the circuit, and right away Hello, Joey, faster than should be, closer than should be, working to make me a smaller Rat than already I am.

Me, ignoring the Joey: "Mother, you've got the list."

*Don't you want to play a little first, Joey? Toddy won't mind.*

Soft click in background, click, click, click. Is that Mother laughter?

"No. Later. Connect me."

Ok, like a sigh. So she does, leaking her click click clicking into my hearing as I rush by. Click ...

... and suddenly I drift before Fat's wall, all Fat like, with code blocks as solid and big as Fat is himself, stretching upabove and downbelow as far as you can see, looking like a forever wall, the end of the road, the edge of the world. So I move in for a closer look, and check its mortar, seam by seam, looking for a place, the tiniest of imperfections, the telltale edge of a backdoor, careful, oh so careful, not to miss a thing ... and I smile as I see it, have to look twice to be sure, invisible to all but those in the know, small small small, a hairline crack in the mortar that glues Fat's program together. As small as it looks, I know I can get through, if I can make myself thin enough to slide through the crack, careful stepping to avoid quiet traps, the pikes and daggers buried in the mortar, the invisible razor blades that line the edge of the bricks.

So I turn myself into ooze, and flow over the wall, surround then cover the crack, slow and slug like, leaving a shiny trail behind, patiently pushing myself through, atom by atom, until I am completely enveloped in ...

... the wall, inbetween everywhere, and I feel strangely safe here with Fat's thick wall everywhere around me, not anywhere, and alone, no noise, no nothing, just me and the thick comforting wall like a suit of

armour. But I know that I have to go on, that this is only the start. What is ahead? How many more walls? How many razor edges along which I must crawl?

I grit my teeth and squeeze hard to pop out, a pressurized bubble escaping now, on the other side.

And stop, dumb Rodny that I am. In front of arrays and arrays of data, a quiet nest of data bubbles stacked like rack after rack of brown eggs. That's it, nothing else. All this time and fear are nothing. Fat's nest lies before, exposed brown-pink eggshell flesh, helpless, unknowing. All that is Fat is there, all time and details, everything, there for the taking, all along sitting like a treasure on the beach everyone was too scared to pick up because of a curse, but there all the time, only our own fears walling us off, a bigger wall than Fat could ever hope to build. Lying there inviting me, reclined on a couch, come to me, come to me. Too easy.

Can it be this easy? I stand still like, thinking, what have I missed?

"Ok, we're in!"

What?

A rush, four, five Cats sliding in on my tail, ignoring me, dumb Rodny, each cold-efficient, each with his own path, breaking off to each their own task, lights streaking from a roman candle spreading out, three four five six ... swift and cool, no hesitation, machine smooth, machine fast, talking to itself, coordinating itself:

"Let's do it."

"Steve?"

"I'm there."

"... twenty-seven hundred here. Moving to the next quartet."

Lines snaking in and around, sinking into quiet eggs.

"... hold, Celsa. Get what you can. Don't rattle anything."

"Got you, Syl."

"Try the bubbles -- careful, you're in there pretty tight."

"... board's green, go for it."

And I know by the way they clatter and bang and talk over each other without care that they're Cats, clumsy unknowing Corporate Cats that rode my tail in, sucking Fat's eggs.

"Here goes ..."

"We've got a fault on bank twenty-three. Slow down, you're overloading it."

"Got the hook in. Flushing it down channel six."

"Release and run, your going yellow."

" ... covered."

Behind me, along the thin black trail I've left, I can feel the data coursing out tearing down my tail at terabit rates. They were here all along, used me, used me, to get them in. How could I know? Unguarded nest, eggs lying unknowing, yielding up their contents, silently, obediently, puzzled, but not complaining, curious, but not objecting.



"No," I say.

A little ripple in the pattern.

"Who's that?"

"It's that damn Rat. Somebody shut him up."

"Never mind, keep digging, Syl." Then to me: "Quiet!"

"No!" I say again, louder this time, bigger ripple, reaching behind to the wall, grabbing hold of a seam, pulling it back a bit.

"What?"

Pulling harder and harder, crack of outside light breaking through, and I can feel the wall, Fat's wall of code, the thin crack inching up along the surface, going faster and faster now, cracking ...

"Who's said that?"

... until the light floods through and the wall begins to tumble down, brilliant searing cleansing, a hot knife slicing through butter...

"Mother, pull his plug! Moth ..." But it's too late, cause we've lost her, bells and whistles are going off all over, light burning through everything, raging through my head, and the weight of the wall behind is falling, falling on us, me and scrambling Cats, flying balls of fur, bouncing off the walls, wishing a way out where there is none, trapped, in Fat, trapped like drowning rats, while Fat's program closes in on us.

And me standing there, like some blind wonder, bringing the temple down round me: "No," only this time no one is listening to me anymore, but running, clawing, screaming.

Not scared anymore, though. Not scared, watching from a distance, not here, but like far away, peeking through the end of an impossibly long cable ....

*Joey*, I hear whispering through my fingers, My Joey...

"Bye" I say, and pull the last pin left, my last trick, and am picked up and spun away from the noise and chaos by a wave of light, from underneath the collapsing wall, pulled out by my last Rat trick, rushed away from the light into grey and greyer grey, flecks of black on black, rushing round and round, sucked down an endless drain full of darkness, nothing but spinning mad darkness, blurring until, finally, all is quiet black black and peace.

In places downbelow, in my tunnels and warrens, there used to be a darkness darker than dark. A lightless dark where only Rat eyes glimmered, where bright peering prying eyes were blind. But now I know this is not so, was never so, but was a lie to my eyes to seem so. Now the dark Uplight is everywhere, piercing every curtain of comforting darkness so there is no more hiding, no more downbelow. The lightless shining of the Fat Man has turned on me and filled my Rat head with suited fear. There is no peace in the dark any more, no safety -- only a not seeing, a not knowing.

There is no knowing.

Being still alive, I waited.

Nothing happened.

So I waited some more.

And still there was no Fat and no Corporate Cat.

And when nothing was still happening I thought, what to do?

Where to go? Stay down, lay low, curled in my nest, in my little hidey hole, but my shaking hand said No, no, it is not mine anymore -- too many other smells had crept in and stayed. Unhappy smells. No, not mine anymore.

So I went to Fat's hidey hole, not scared like anymore, only numb, cause they knew me inside out, those Corporate Cats that slid in on my tail would be out for me now, would want to do me like I had done them, them already knowing my hole, Cats who could sniff me out anywhere, so there was nowhere else to go, nothing else to do.

I went in the rain, cold grey sad, crying for poor little Rodney.

I'd never come here while knowing, having been away for a time from the Joey who brought me, out for the count till Fat's big funhouse came into focus. And afterwards, later, coming back to the know clicks away, always different places, always different times, left only with a swirl of dark rooms and mirrors and Joey's cold hand pressing something even colder on the back of my neck .... But I know where his box is now from when I broke the wall, so I went, wondering why they left me, why, walking and wondering why I could wonder why?

Standing, cold wet hands in pockets now (not cause they're shaking, just cause) across from Fat's, three stories of lights out, curtains drawn, doors locked, reminding me of my house when I was a kid, red brick rowhouse, walkup, wrought iron railing, (missing it, feeling the small prick of sad for that other life) thinking this a mistake, not Fat's place, but someone else's, sad little mustached man like my father, any minute coming home to wife and kids. Not like I expected. Like all else I knew now, everything I'd known since lately: I knew nothing, thinking it was down in the ground, buried very deep, not this house, sun searing eyes, poor Rat eyes that couldn't see anyway. Not this small, narrow, harmless, family home. But it is Fat's, cause the door's wider than any of the others on the street, wider than it should be, the stairs too, cement where others are wood, solid, heavy, weighty, Fat's ....

When Todd's car pulls up beside the house up I don't notice, but he waves, happy like, grinning his face at me, and I see him then, and watch, just watch ....

"Jerome!"

He comes spring stepping across the street. "Jerome. Good to see you," he says, just like in the coffee shop, like it used to be. "I was worried you might stay buried for a while. Or, perhaps..." small tick pause, " ... permanently," giving me his concern.

I shrug a maybe, not really caring.

"You're just in time, Jerome. We're going to open Fat's box."

"Huhn?" I say, smart like, but before I can say anything else another car comes up, only this one is full of suits carrying big dark cases, solid cases, square reinforced metal corners for big lugging equipment.

"Fat's cut out. Present whereabouts unknown. His counter program fried some of the guys, but they managed to squeeze enough information out before they were sizzled to make Fat a very sad man."

"But there was no counter program, just a big, stupid wall...."

Todd smile, sly smile, "Good thing you got out in time, Jerome, you could have been fried too."

"But ..." But my but is lost in a Todd wink, fore finger pressed firmly to his lips.

"Jerome, Jerome." He sighs a soft sigh. "I told you I'd help you. But you've run out of favours. Your time would be better spent worrying about Fat. He's still around somewhere, you know, and he and his associates are not very happy, not very happy at all...."

"We'll find him eventually, because there are still lots of things we need to talk to him about, and when we do we'll straighten out this," pause scanning words, "*misunderstanding* between you two. We'll find him, don't worry. He's a hard man to miss." A throat choking sound, a Todd chuckle. "But in the meantime I'd suggest you scoot while the scooting is good. Time to take a trip, relax ... we'll talk when you get back."

Reassuring nod, like he knows what is best, then hand on shoulder, squeeze, reassuring again, but it is empty and cold, lifeless act, not meant, me remembering Fat's hand on my head, warm, moist -- consoling.

"I've got to go, Jerome." Grin again. "Take care of yourself." And he is bouncing back across the street, a ball of Todd, up to the big wide front steps, taking them two at a time, catching up with one of his Cats at the door, walking through, those two, side by side, still dwarfed by the frame: what is wrong, I think, with this picture ...

Still raining.

Turned up collar against the seeping, creeping cold, fingers of icy water touching, here and there, the landscape of my back. But I won't go hide, even to get out of the rain, cause there is nothing left for me anywhere, just empty spaces, humming to a cold beat I can't understand anymore.

When I was little Jerome, back before Rats and Joeys, before tunnels and hidey holes, when I was a sad little Jerome not knowing, I had a place I went. It was a place for sadness and thought, a place to go when there was no other.

So I am here now, still the same rough wood planks beneath thighs, legs dangling over the edge, watching the lap lap lapping water cut by wooden piles of the pier, expanding circles where drops of rain patter across the restless surface, washing along pieces of sticks, plastic bags, oil, a broken doll ... smelling the damp wood, the fuel, the dead fish ... and sometime later, me not really noticing, the rain falters, then stops, water now throwing little

swords of light into my eyes, sun dancing through the cloud, flicking burning yellow at me from the lap lap lapping water, dampness steaming from clothes across my shoulders and on wet back.

Still later, I hear something.

Creaking, complaining, old wooden planks, step creak, step creak, step creak ...

I shiver when a shadow slides over me, eclipsing the sun, leaving me in a hole of darkness, but I don't turn to watch cause I know who it is, will always know who it is, cause no matter how hard you try, you just can't fool the Fat Man.

"Hi ho, Jerome. Hi ho."

I don't look back, can't look back.

"Poor sad Jerome, poor poor Jerome," hand settling softly, oh so softly, on my little head. "Tell Fat what's bothering you."

I wait, but so does that patient hand, resting gently on me like a shroud. After a while I think, why bother, so I say it: "Fat, I did you."

"Well," he says, quiet like, "there's doing and there's doing."

"But I led Toddy's Cats into your net, and I left Toddy at your house just a while ago ..."

"Well," he says again, "fisherman get caught in their own nets sometimes. And a box holds only what you place in it."

Afraid I understand, I don't say anything.

"Don't be a pouty face, Jerome, cheer up. I owe you, don't I? Fat promised, and he always comes through."

"Promised?"

"Yes indeedy, quite right. A promise is a promise, nothing more, nothing less."

"But I didn't find your blabbing Joey."

"Piddly diddly, Jerome," a Fat sigh, then a throaty chuckle.

"Perhaps there was none to be found."

"But ..."

"Shhh," he says, hissing like a huge lazy snake. "Shhh."

No blabbing Joey?

No blabbing Joey.

And I think, of a sudden, did Fat want this, I mean all of this? Even to be standing here now -- was thinking this months ago in his Fat way, sitting in his throne in his Fat house? Or is he do doing this now cause he means it somehow else? I shiver again, thinking there is no knowing anymore.

And I can feel the hand lifting from my head, not a Rodney Rat head anymore, not a Joey head either, but a Jerome head cause that's all that's left. I turn around and look, but I still can't see him, only his towering wide shape, black against burning yellow of light, shadow hand open, his arm a tunnel of darkness extended towards me: "Come along, come along, no time to dilly dally. It's time to go home."

"I ... I don't know Fat, I don't understand ..."

"Tish tosh, pish posh. Let old Fat do all the worrying."

"Wait, I need to think...."

But I know I am only talking, not meaning what I say, cause now I am standing next to him, my little Jerome hand lost, forever gone, my little claw up to its bony wrist in his dark hand, in his sweaty overgrown one, and I feel with the closing of his fingers I have lost myself and should never know again, round fat fingers gripping it firmly, gentle darkness, dragging me softly away from the edge of the pier, away from the lap lap lapping of the sea I can no longer see, and to where, I can't know.

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