

Hello, Everyone, and welcome back to an old guy who knows shit. Stluhdog here with some more Stories from Life. This is

Episode 9

Rats

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It was a 162 whole sq ft. it was a one room apartment in mid-town, and it was \$600 a month, but the job of superintendent went along with it, and that meant \$200 a month, so in the balance we were at \$400, which was my budget. And so I became superintendent of a 115 year old building on West 55th Street between 9th and 10th. This was in the late 1980s, before the City had been cleaned up, when taxis ruled the streets and if you persevered apartments could still be had for regular people. There was an old A&P on the corner of 9th, behind which was a building-lot sized parking lot, then a theatre, followed by a storage warehouse, followed by us. Two more apartment buildings on the far side of us, and then an auto sound shop, a restaurant and you were on 10th. On the other side of the street, the north side, the building facing 9th was an old TV studio, and it took up half the block. Behind it was one building of residential lofts, and then storage warehouse from there to 10th Avenue. It was worrisome as a place to live because in this entire, long avenue block, there were three small apartment buildings on the south side and one converted warehouse of lofts on the north side. My concern was entirely of a safety nature – so few residents on a block makes for a lonely walk late at night. But you know what? when you have an apartment offered to you in midtown Manhattan, I don't care where it is, if it's in your budget, you take it, you do not quibble. Sybil.

My first clue that I was about to enter a completely different, dark world, was the first time the landlord took me to the basement. The walls looked like rough-hewn stone, set in a concrete-like mortar that was inches thick. I say “concrete-like” because while it looked like concrete, you could scrape it away with your fingers. The other thing I could not help but notice was that most of the holes had been filled by hammering boards into them, and there were places where they stuck out. “What's that?” I asked, in my last moment of innocence. He looked at me blandly and calmly said, “Rats. Not many apartments on this block. Warehouses mean more rats. One of your jobs will be to keep them out, and that means plugging their holes. Course, they just keep digging new ones. One of the reasons gotta have a resident super. That and the boiler, which is about 75 years old and needs some TLC.” With that he led the way back to the boiler. I stood looking at the walls a minute, pondering that phrase “means more rats,” sensing, I think, that some safe wall in my world had just been shattered. But then I shrugged it off and went to learn how to light the boiler and shoot the tubes.

It was only a matter of days before I saw the first one. I think it was the first time I went down there by myself. And there was one against the wall on the other side. And he didn't scurry away when I turned the light on. He looked at me for a minute first. I had the weirdest sense that he was taking my measure. And then he turned and strolled – yes, strolled – into a new hole. The first of many that I attempted to plug.

Whenever I saw one after that, they pretty much acted like rats, scurrying away when the light went on, showing me where the new holes were. There were areas that had floors installed and I struggled to make the walls and ceilings tight but I could not keep them out. They would not be denied. I had to throw away everything I put down there. But I jump ahead.

I don't know if you ever noticed, but most residential buildings in the city have a spot somewhere off the sidewalk next to the building where there is a stand of garbage cans for the residents. This was where the battle line first formed. Rats like garbage.

The first few times a rat was in the garbage can, I ended up tipping over the cans and ripping up bags until it would leap out and run away, but it was incredibly messy. I asked the landlord about it. His response: "Get a long-handled shovel." I said, "What for?" He looked at me like I was some kind of pansy. "You aren't the freakin' SPCA. Fuckin' rat is stupid enough to get trapped in a garbage can, you kill it. Make it into garbage."

So the battle escalated. I think that all of my frustrations of living in the City and just the day to day grind of survival all got focused on those rats. They were everywhere, and I became infuriated at them. I got a long-handled shovel, and I sharpened it. And yes, I stood on West 55th Street armed with a shovel and killed rats in the garbage cans.

I do regret it. I am ashamed of it. But it is the only time in my life – that I can remember, anyway – that I actually enjoyed killing something. They were so filthy, so brazen, so IN MY FACE and they SO deserved to die. I mean, good God, they're freakin' RATS, for crying out loud. I had no qualms about being their executioner. I saw myself as a great warrior, a knight, armed with my spear, doing battle with the fearsome dragons – OK, so it was a stretch, but I made it nonetheless.

Oh, and there was the stairway down to the front basement door, that went under the stoop. Had a drain in it, and it was just as likely to have drug addicts as copulating couples as homeless people crashing, one or the other of which was at least a weekly occurrence. But it could ALWAYS be counted on to have rats. So you would hear them under the stoop when you came in at night. Or they would just be sitting in a shadow, watching. Brazen.

I got good. I killed at least one every time they were in the trash can. Sometimes more. Four was my record. Brutal, ugly, loud: bang – Bang – BANG/Crunch – "Got you sucka!" I became a madman. A Rat Killer.

So leap ahead a few years. This has varied in intensity, but has just become part of life on 55th street. (In retrospect, it's amazing what can become "normal," isn't it?) I meet with some success, get some work, meet my wife, we get pregnant, we're confronting all the life questions new parents ask, like "shouldn't one of us have a real job?" And looking at our options.

And so I get a show. I have many very late nights.

On one particular night, in the very wee hours of the morning, I come round the A&P and head down the block. The corner street light is out, and so is the third, so there is a distinct, round halo of light right in front of the parking lot behind the A&P. I'm toodling along, thinking about the show, and am suddenly brought up short – by a rat.

Now when I say “brought up short,” I am not kidding, because this rat was right in the middle of the pool of light, right in the middle of the sidewalk, right directly in my path. It was sitting up on its haunches, with its front legs just dangling, looking right at me. It never flinched, in spite of the fact that I came quite close to tripping on it, but it just sat there, up, tall, but relaxed, its head cocked a little bit to one side, just looking directly at me. Now this was, as you might think, a little remarkable, and I stood there for a moment looking back into his eyes. And I felt that familiar animosity rising in my gut and was thinking I could place-kick this sucker half way down the bock, when right about that time he tilts his head, just the slightest bit, toward the street. I look out, and just about, as they say, crap my pants.

The street was filled with hundreds of rats. They were spread out, evenly, about two to three feet apart, and they were everywhere. The street was filled for as far as I could see. The sidewalk on the other side of the street. The sidewalk all around me. The parking lot. Every bit of open pavement that I could see had a rat every two to three feet. I want to say thousands, but for it to have been thousands, they would have been packed together, and they weren't. They were evenly spread out. Everywhere. No pairs, no clusters. All individual rats, all perfectly spaced. Spread formation.

So my eyes scan the vista of rats surrounding me, and then they come back to the first rat, the one on its haunches. There is an open circle of light around him about ten feet across, and he's still sitting there all by himself, but now I can see, in the fringes of the light around him, his minions awaiting his command. And his eyes meet mine directly, and he very gradually tilts his head back. We lock eyes for a moment, and then he flicks his tail, once, and just like that, as if on command, all the rats take off instantly at a dead run for the parking lot. They pay no attention to me, running right past me, some actually stepping on my feet as they go by. I watch them fill the lot in a second and the next second it's completely empty.

And again my eyes came back to the first rat, calmly sitting up on its haunches, front legs dangling, little black beady eyes just looking right at me. And he cocked his head again, and this time, I swear to you, he said to me, quite clearly, with his look: “Don't push your luck, Buddy.” There I was, standing on 55th street in the middle of the night, and at that moment I forgot this was a rat – we were two creatures squaring off in a turf war, and he had just let me know (a) he was the boss and (b) he had complete control over his minions. I was being strong-armed by a rat. I felt this very strongly, had sudden visions of Walt Disney characters in 1940s gangster movies. And then, as if he knew I'd gotten his point, his expression changed, and he looked at me almost curiously for a minute. And then just as calmly and casually as you please, he drops to all fours and

walks – nay, strolls – and I’m pretty sure I recognized that stroll – after his army into the parking lot. I stood, transfixed, and watched him. He didn’t accelerate to a normal rat scamper until he actually got into the parking lot, and then he moved with a flash of his tail and disappeared.

Now what exactly this meant many will say I had to have read into it. I know there are those who will say it is absurd to think that such carefully coordinated intimidation could not possibly be organized and executed by rats. I imagined that he was on his haunches. The perfect spread formation. The tail-flick command. And I especially imagined, projected, whatever, that part about the rat looking at me with a threat? Give me a break, they will say.

Yeah. Well. I’ll tell you. I backed off on the shovel. If it was possible to let ‘em go after that I did. Landlord called me a wimp, but I didn’t care. I didn’t tell him about the encounter, either, because I knew he’d tell me I was crazy. Just like those of you who think I had to have imagined it. I knew I didn’t. That rat was for real. And he meant business.

I kept thinking about the movie it felt like I was in – it was a bizarre combination of Tolkein, Disney and Edward G. Robinson made by Ralph Bakshi. I was still living in the same real world, but now I knew that under the surface, literally, under the very sidewalks I strode, there was a dark army. An army of rats. And I was privileged to have the secret knowledge that *it exists*.

Not too long after that the opportunity arose to give up being superintendent. I did not hesitate. Shortly after that, an opportunity arose to leave the City. And when you’ve struggled ten years there, believe me it’s hard to leave.

But that apartment on that block? I was glad to leave. It was his turf. I wanted no part of bringing up a kid on his turf.

He won.

This is an old guy who knows shit, signing off till next time.