

Rats!

Breathes there a man alive who has spent a leisurely afternoon poring over *Mad* magazine without thinking, what would happen if Ernest Hemingway and Garrison Keillor collaborated on an episode of “Spy vs Spy”? Wonder no more. We have Kevin Dohmen, the thinking man’s Ernest Keillor, a Garrison Hemingway for the ages. We have Realtor’s standing by the phones for Kevin and Dan’s neighbors’

Part I: A Matter of Some Importance



It’s a June morning in northern Virginia.

The trees and shrubbery in Del Ray are lush. In an almost fluorescent blue sky, the bright sun nourishes the fertile earth. Across the Potomac River, our members of

Congress are, as usual, plotting world domination. Outside my home office window I can see, and hear, my neighbor – we’ll call him Dan – working in his driveway.

Dan is a political revolutionary and a sculptor. Wearing welder’s goggles and leathers, he looks like he belongs in the bar scene in *Star Wars*. Oblivious to the world around him, he heats a three-quarter-inch slab of mild steel with an acetylene torch until it glows yellow-orange. He turns the torch off, steps back a yard or so, takes hold of a ten-pound sledge hammer standing upright on the blacktop, and with a full, overhead swing, begins hammering the hot metal into something that will eventually become a graceful mermaid ascending from the sea like Botticelli’s *Venus*.

For two hours or so, I quietly go about my work, trying to ignore the flying sparks and seismic activity originating not fifteen feet from where I sit. Dan does the same, apparently ignoring my silence. This is how Dan and I spend our days — until there is a mutually interesting project.

I’m in the middle of my to-do list, when I notice that Dan’s driveway is soundless. I’ve become used to a certain magnitude of auditory input from

Dan’s direction, so sudden quietness can be unsettling. I manage to adapt to the silence and put in another thirty minutes or so of work.

Then Dan raps on my window.

When I look up, he makes a gesture as if cranking open a car window. He is a raccoon in negative, face rusty brown with dirt and corrosion, except for the pinkish white circles where his goggles were. His eyes are alight from within. I open the window. “My, don’t we look fetching today,” I say.

He waves off my comment as if swatting a horsefly. His glance darts left and right before boring directly into my eyes. In his Bronx accent he says, “I need your consultation on a matter of some importance.” His conspiratorial tone draws me in.

“A matter of some importance....” I repeat.

“Rats!” he says with a hiss. He looks both ways again, then adds, “Under my back porch.”

In a small flood of adrenaline, the world is changed. We are on a mission.

Without another word, I’m out of my seat and out the back door, where we meet and troop around the fence to his back porch.

Dan lives in a small, brick, duplex that was built during World War II. His back porch consists of a six-inch concrete slab jutting out from the back of his house, supported on the far end by two ten-by-ten inch concrete columns. Six concrete steps off the back connect the porch to his back yard. Dan points to a hole about the diameter of his fist near the base of one of the supporting columns.

“Hmm,” I say.

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“I saw him go in there just five minutes ago,” Dan says. We hunker down to take a closer look. We point; we analyze; we discuss strategy, Dan in his leathers and I in my Oxford-cloth shirt and khaki pants. We talk traps, cats, poisons, snakes, timetables, and the nature of nocturnal mammals.

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“I smell kerosene or something,” I say.

“Well,” he says. “That’s another thing I wanted to tell you about.”

“When I first saw him run down there, I figured he didn’t actually live there. I had this used motor oil sitting here.” He holds up a yellow and black coffee can. “I thought I’d try and flush him out.” He mimes pouring the oil into the hole and assumes the position of a man about to strike something downward with a long stick. Behind him on the grass lies an old axe handle.

“God, I hate rats!” he says. But there is an odd Mona Lisa smile on his stubbled face.

“And?”

“And nothing. I waited ten minutes.”

“And now you think he lives in there,” I say. It is not a question but a statement of the horrible truth. We cannot tell how we know it, but there it is. It’s a man thing, a wonderful thing, an opportunity to release an unapologetic allotment of testosterone upon the world in the service of women and children. Life saturated with purpose. Stand aside, citizens. We’ve secured the perimeter. We’ll take it from here. National Security, and so forth.

“Yes,” he says. His face is a grim mask squinting in the sunlight.

Kevin D. Dohmen

Rats!



Part II: Doh!

“How much oil did you put in there?” I ask. He holds up the yellow and blue Chock-Full-O-Nuts can and touches the side with his thumbnail to indicate the depth.

“Hmm,” I say again. I put my ear nearly to the ground and look into the slanting hole. “Probably not enough to get to the bottom of the hole before getting absorbed.”

“Just what I was thinking,” he says. And then, after a moment of thought, his face lights up and he heads into his basement. He emerges with a plastic half-gallon milk container with ‘kerosene’ neatly printed on it in black magic marker. He unscrews the cap and pours the contents of the full container into the hole.

“That ought to get him out of there,” I say, half sarcastic and half in admiration. I casually walk over to the axe handle, pick it up, and join Dan by the rat hole. We stand up and wait.

After a minute, nothing. After two minutes, nothing. After five minutes, nothing. Wordlessly, and conceding not defeat but merely the need for tactical re-evaluation, we each return to our mundane daily tasks.

Over the next few days, I see Dan making his way toward the rat hole, bearing assorted coffee cans, plastic jugs, metal gasoline cans, etc.

One morning I have an emerging idea involving traps and poison, and I head out to talk tactics with Dan. I find him standing over the hole. As I round the fence, he looks my way and holds up his hand in a ‘stop’ gesture. He puts his index finger to his lips. He looks around as if to see if anyone is watching, then fishes under his leathers and into the big pocket of his Carhartt overalls and comes out with a red-white-and-blue box of kitchen matches.

Now, contrary to immediate appearances, Dan is an educated man. In addition to Bronx-ese English, he speaks fluent Spanish, French, Arabic, and some Vietnamese. He holds at least two college degrees. He is internationally known in the art community and in certain far-left political circles. With Scotch tape and paper clips, he can make any repairs necessary to any automobile mass-produced anywhere on the planet before 1972. He understands force, mass, lubrication, acceleration, torque, and combustion. It is for these reasons that I fail to understand what is

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about to happen and do not react in time.

With a flourish he draws out a match. In one motion he strikes the match head on the side of the box. It flowers into flame as its momentum carries it to the rat hole near the support column of his porch. I open my mouth and yell, “No!” But neither of us ever hears the sound.

Before the match hits the ground, the shimmering fumes emanating from the rat hole erupt into a basketball size sphere of bright yellow flames with a ‘foom’-ing sound. Dan reacts immediately, straightening up and scooting backward about ten inches, putting the concrete column between him and the hole. Less than half a second later a second explosion from deep inside the hole erupts. Orange fire roars from the hole like grapeshot from a cannon, blooming into a deep-orange and black fulmination perhaps seven feet across, dislodging small chunks of dirt and debris. Simultaneously, the blast

hits the concrete column and is deflected to either side, and the porch slab is physically lifted half an inch or so off the top of the column and dropped back again with a heavy, grating clunk. The concussion hits my chest like a pitched softball. A small ‘oof’ escapes my mouth.

In an instant it is over. My ears ring, and the wind is knocked out of me, probably more from fear than anything. I look at Dan. He looks at me. We don’t say anything at all. He looks like Wiley Coyote after a catastrophic launch failure. His pants are singed and smoking. Black soot covers everything within a radius of about eight feet of the rat hole. Small particles rain down softly around us. Dan guffaws, and in a minute we’re both laughing so hysterically we have to sit down where we stand.

After we’ve settled down and have had a moment to count fingers and toes, a movement out of the corner of my eye catches my attention. The rat, looking like a sort of urban prairie dog on a small hill of mulch at the other end of Dan’s backyard, stretches up on his hind legs, sniffs the air, and trundles off into a hedge.

Dan gestures at the warm vapors rising gently from the base of his porch column, dusts off his hands, and says, “Well, I guess that settles *that*.”

