

Urban camping.

OVER HIS fire inside a bathtub in the dilapidated building that he called home, Victor warmed his hands.

It's cold, the rat said to him. Throw another piece of that pallet on the fire.

"No," Victor said. "I have to save some for later."

You have plenty. You collected wood all summer, said the rat. You have a huge pile.

"It has to last."

Then burn a leg of that table or whatever it was. It's hardwood. It will burn slow.

Victor pulled a table leg from the wood pile and stirred his fire. Shadows and fall colors from the fire danced on the walls. Victor tossed the leg on the flames, pulled the collars of his shirts and coat up around his neck, and watched the fire lick the new wood. "Wish I had that leg when you were alive, Jesus. You could've used it."

What are you talking about? My name's not Jesus. I'm a rat.

"Not you. My dog, Jesus. He only had three legs. Followed me around, so I adopted him." The rat groomed her paws.

"He looked like a jackal. He was scrappy. You should've seen him try to dig. Should've seen him fall down. Jesus, he was graceful.

"I don't know what happened to him. Three legs, probably got hit."

Victor searched through his plastic grocery bags, found his bottle and took a hit. "Jesus was the only one who ever loved me, him and my mother." He paused. "I can't be sure about my mother."

Against a wall leaned a scorched DO NOT ENTER street sign. Victor laid it across the bathtub over half the fire. He sang:

The world is black / the world is white

*It turns by day / and then by night**

From one of his bags he took out half a loaf of bread and a couple of hotdogs. "What are you looking at?" he asked the rat. "These are mine. Codell gave them to me." He picked up a car antennae and skewered the hotdogs. On the DO NOT ENTER sign he laid two pieces of bread, rotated the hotdogs over the fire, and sang:

A child is black / a child is white

Together they grow / to see the light

*The beautiful light**

The rat twitched her nose and whiskers. *Give me some. I have a family to feed too.*

"Why are you bringing them up? Leave me alone." Victor inspected the toast and hotdogs. He ate them in nibbles.

Would you let your kids go hungry?

"They're grown by now."

The rat rolled on her side, revealing a pink brood suckling.

"Oh, don't show them! No, no, no! Leave me alone. Please." Victor went out of the bathroom and urinated, marking the floor in a spaghetti pattern.

Who do you think you are - Jackson Pollock?

“Jackson Pollock! Jackson Pollock! I’m Victor! Hail to the Victors!” He laughed and hacked all the way back to the bathroom. The rat was nosing around his bags. Victor kicked at her, took a long swig, and wrapped himself like a mummy in everything he had. He sat next to his fire, patted his bags behind him for a pillow, and contracted. His eyes closed. He imagined Jesus curled up next to him. The bottle and Jesus warmed him in ways he could not express. Smoke from the fire smelled of resin and made him ache for something, but he couldn’t name it.

After several still minutes, the rat climbed on the DO NOT ENTER sign and gently tugged Victor’s bread bag out from behind him. She ate well. Empty, the bag drifted into the fire and melted, plasticizing, for a few moments, the insistent stench of misery. The fire shrunk to a glow, the color of sugar maples in October.

*Three Dog Night, “Black & White.”

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