



JACQUELYNN FLOYD

Oh, rats! The truth is awful

Something is living in our attic. It skitters and scrabbles. Sometimes it thumps.

Since first noticing these disturbing sounds, I have been on a long journey of determined denial. Perhaps it's just my imagination, I thought, or maybe it's the furnace. Maybe it's the "house settling."

Even after accepting the notion that there was something alive up there, I imagined hopefully that it might be something cute and furry, like a nest of sweet baby bunnies.

Or it might, at least, be raccoons, or opossums, or an escaped convict.

But I had to face the awful truth when the truth faced me. A few nights ago, I backed my car into the garage and punched the button to lower the door.

There, a few feet before my horrified eyes, clinging to the lip of the descending garage door, was a fine, healthy specimen of *Rattus rattus*, the common roof rat, the verminous scourge of human societies since the dawn of civilization.

It gazed at me through the windshield as it rode the door downward, its eyes a pair of inscrutable obsidian beads. It was as nonchalant as a man riding an escalator to the sporting goods department.

I swear to you by all that is holy, we are not filthy people. We wash the dishes and carry out the trash. We do not leave half-eaten sandwiches in the closets or store buckets of fish guts under the bed. We're clean!

Yet we're hosting a species so linked in the human consciousness with *filth* that they give all rodents a bad name.

We needed professional help.

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Facing the awful truth about our attic

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I called a man named David Fincannon, a friendly and businesslike person who is cited in the professional literature as a "wildlife removal expert," which sounds much nicer than "rat exterminator."

"We see 'em in all kinds of houses," he assured me kindly. "They're not in your house as a place for food. They're up in your attic for shelter."

Mr. Fincannon not only knows a lot about rats, but he also knows a lot about people who are horrified to learn they have rats on their premises.

"There are people we deal with who are so scared we can't even

use the word 'rat,'" he said. "And, technically, it *is* 'wildlife.'"

I asked for this, I thought bitterly. I wanted a house that sits on a creek so we could look out the window and see birds and rabbits and squirrels and even, on a couple of memorable occasions, bobcats. Nature has visited us in many guises, but only the rats made themselves quite so much at home. Mr. Fincannon said he has found a lot of creatures living in people's attics or beneath their floors — snakes, birds, and one time, a family of flying squirrels.

One especially challenging job required locating and extracting a suicidal skunk that had crawled beneath a hot water heater and expired. Every time the homeowners

ran a hot bath, the house was filled with the robust aroma of dead skunk.

"Rat jobs," however, are his bread and butter.

"We see them every day," he said. And, he added, in every part of town, and in every type of house, from mobile homes to mansions.

I have to concede a grudging admiration for a species so hardy, prolific and adaptable — the only things guaranteed to survive the apocalypse are rats, roaches and possibly Christmas fruitcakes — but it's not really the same as liking them. Oddly, though, I can't bear the thought of personally killing them. You can purchase the means of doing the job yourself, but I'd rather drink pine cleaner than

touch a dead rodent.

So we're letting the experts handle this one. Mr. Fincannon spent many long hours this week "animal-proofing" our home, closing up every dime-sized opening through which a crafty and determined intruder might weasel.

I was absurdly grateful that he kept using the word "animals," as if bad luck and cruel fate might just as easily have made us host to an infestation of otters or hummingbirds. When I pressed him to identify our guests, though, he decided I could handle the truth:

"Oh, yeah," he said nodding. "You were right."

Rats.