

"THE RAT'S TRAP"
By Alexander G. Tozzi

Down in the garbage a rat clawed for one last bite of moldy cheese. Cheese was its favorite food, and it quickly brushed aside all the scraps of rotted meat, stinky vegetables, rancid fruit, and even a few melted candy bars. Only cheese would sate the rat's hunger.

In this particular pile it found no cheese. Angrily clawing at the heap, gnawing at the dirt in its claws, the rat sauntered off, hissing as it scoured the dump for another promising trash pile.

Following a trail of moonlight, the rat wandered into the junk area. One night the rat had seen a couple of teenagers vandalizing the scrap cars, and in their ruinous wake they had left, amongst other things, half-eaten cheeseburgers. Just thinking of that gooey cheese got the rat's belly rumbling, and he began to run toward the first car he saw.

If there was cheese then the rat couldn't smell it, such was the stench of oil and gasoline. Slowing to a crawl, the rat dragged its hungry belly across filthy dirt and came up under the crumpled trunk of the car. It was cold there, and the rat sneezed before he cut a hole in the weakened metal with its thick incisors. The loose metal fell with a soft clunk, and the rat leaped into the car.

Not a trace of light came into the stuffy trunk. This didn't concern the rat much, as he was content to feel his way around. But still the scent of cheese eluded him. When he had leapt into that last car with the two teenagers he had detected a greasy scent which led him to his tasty dinner. In the stuffiness of the trunk he smelled nothing but a rank odor, probably filth. No greasiness entered his snout.

Figuring he should dig further, the rat made his way through black odds and ends until he reached the rough fabric of a back seat. Once more applying his teeth, and also his claws, he peeled fabric away and tore out bunches of cotton.

Squeezing his frame through the seat, he popped out and tumbled down into the back seat.

Moonlight came in through the windows, and through the wide windshield he saw the heaps of junk and trash towering above him. He squeaked in fear that those piles would tumble over and bury him, starving, under a mound of refuse.

A greasy scent tickled his whiskers and all fear was forgotten.

It was cheese! Had to be cheese.

Springing himself right-side up, the rat raised his snout and sniffed like those dogs he had once seen prowling the dump. It was hard to say if it was cheese, but the greasiness indeed matched the smell he had sniffed before. It made his stomach rumble, and he wavered from hunger. He needed that cheese, and would stop at nothing to find it.

The smell was wafting in from the front seat.

Coiling into a ball, the rat launched himself from the back seat and latched onto the back of the front seat. This one was torn and his right paw got stuck in a spring. He squealed and flailed, wedging his paw in all the more. It hurt as though he were caught in a bear trap!

Not until his lungs hurt did he stop squealing, his muscles ache that he stopped flailing. The cheese-loving rodent hung there, teeny drops of blood dripping onto the muddy backseat below him.

Panic coursed through the rat's veins. He had no regrets for his leap of hunger, but could not decide how to get out of this. He tried gnawing at the fabric, but that loosened his hold on the seat, and he might tear his leg off if he fell. With negligible use of his free claw he tried slipping his trapped one out. The pain was excruciating.

All the while the scent of greasy food made his belly rumble, his mouth drool gobs of saliva.

Licking his chops, the rat began to think that the only way out of this was to gnaw off his foot. It was an unpleasant practice, but he knew from seeing other vermin do the same that

sometimes it was the only solution.

He took a deep breath of greasy air and moved in to sever his paw. As his mouth opened, a lump of drool fell on that paw. It hurt, made the rat wince and shake. But somehow, it loosened his paw!

Now the rat had no idea what lubrication was, but it saw as clear as day that its drool might be the key to freeing itself, paw intact. All it needed to do was keep up the supply.

So, taking great whiffs of that greasy odor, the rat salivated as though it were rabid. Each mouthful of drool was let to fall on the spring, and gently, very gently, the rat edged his paw out. When the spring was bathed in the translucent stuff his paw came out without a hitch.

It stung worse than the time he had been bitten by an ant. Crouching atop the front seat, the rat held its paw in the other for a time, feeling the pain slowly ebb away, only to rush back in, fade away, rush back in, and continue.

With a sigh the rat decided that its paw was okay, and that he just needed to let it rest.

A bite of cheese couldn't hurt, though.

Free of the spring, the rat carefully climbed down the front seat and followed the aroma to the glove compartment. Holding onto the slats of the vent, the rat lifted the plastic lever with its head and near fell off its ladder at the burst of greasy goodness.

Shaking off its stupor, the rat leapt into the dark confines and found a wrapper wherein lay a cold, but juicy, half-eaten cheeseburger. The cheese, the rat was pleased to discover, was exquisitely moldy, and medicine to its paw.

THE END