

## A Rat in a Cage

Nicholas Rossi

Having been sent to fetch a pan for his mom out of their assigned cubicle, the boy had crept down the cement stairs towards the complex's lowest level on that particular summer morning with his usual apprehension. Although he never told his sister, who would have undoubtedly mocked him incessantly, he dreaded having to go down into the basement. Even though they had rented this apartment for two years as of this summer, which was longer than the three of them had lived in any one place since they had left his childhood home when he was five, Jack secretly hated being sent on a mission to "The Cage." The damp cold air that enveloped him halfway down the basement stairs always gave him chills from his chest to his knees, and the fear of nondescript bug monstrosities kept his eyes locked on his feet until he reached the final concrete step.

But none of those sensations were worse than the feeling that came over him when he finally had to raise his eyes from the last stair. The crippling fear took hold when he beheld the seemingly endless corridor of chain link and clutter. It looked like a prison for broken appliances and deteriorating cardboard boxes. But it wasn't what could be seen from the stairway that paralyzed him; it was what lay hidden in the nooks and crouched waiting in the crannies. The terrifying possibilities of what could be peeking out from behind the stained sofa or overflowing paper sacks dumped a double dose of adrenaline into his bloodstream and tightened up his chest.

The only way to ensure those hidden villains would not catch him was to sprint for the storage unit third from the last on the right side. Always gripping the key to the padlock tightly in his right hand, he would lunge across his body with his left as soon as he was in reach of the lock and jam the key into the slot with a focused ferocity. On this particular day, this took a few extra tries and a deep breath before the teeth of the key clicked against their counterparts, the lock slipped, and the door swung open.

As a sort of reflexive defense mechanism, the boy shut the door behind him after he had stepped completely within The Cage. This created a sort of claustrophobic comfort that allowed his muscles to loosen, but not quite relax completely.

Now the search for the pan began. He had a general idea of where the boxes of loose kitchen junk were in the unit, but he honestly had no idea what a saucepan looked like exactly. He slid past the plastic lawn chairs and moved with purpose towards the back corner of The Cage, scanning for the word "Kitchen" or something similar scribbled on the cardboard faces as he did.

He ran his fingers over the words on the front of the boxes, methodically scanning over and over again. The longer he looked, the smaller The Cage became around him. He began to push and pull aside boxes on the front of the shelves in hopes of exposing the mission objective. Rifling through the sea of

beige, pushing past book spines and shooting glances back at the door, the boy began to search with a frantic dedication.

“Where is it? Where is it?” he muttered under his breath, pushing aside the plastic chairs that hadn’t seen the light of day since his family had moved in two years before, as evidenced by the extensive network of cobwebs strung between the arms and seats. A fresh sack of eggs quivered as the stack slid up against the front fence of the cubicle. Quickly crouching and pulling another box forward across the floor with the sickening scraping sound of cardboard against concrete, the boy felt the ghost grips loosen as his eyes fell on “POTS, PANS, ETC.” written neatly in permanent marker across the top flap.

In his haste to tear open the chest that he was sure held his treasure, Jack flailed an elbow back into the stack of trash cubes behind, causing the stack to sway like tall grass in a soft summer breeze. The tower teetered a bit too far and the top box tumbled down with a muffled thud. The death grip of terror tightened around his neck with lethal force. Whipping around and forcing himself into the seated position, he looked almost comical in his silent horror, like an aging man unexpectedly shitting himself for the first time. It took a moment for the boy to identify the source of the noise, but once his eyes focused, Jack realized that he had discovered something much more valuable than every saucepan in the box.

Pouring forth from the mouth of the fallen box was a waterfall of memories that Jack had teetered between suppressing and cherishing over the past seven years of his young life. Memories usually either questioned or cemented in the pitch-black infinity of one of the various bedrooms he had slept in since his father had died. Memories always seen as rich colors shining through a thick fog, without definition or detail, but real nonetheless. Sometimes these memories flickered against the backs of Jack’s eyelids and sometimes they shimmered through a thin layer of tears.

His vision was clear on that summer morning when he found the artifacts of his father. Spilling out onto the floor, his father’s denim coat lay in a heap at the front of the box. The jean jacket was just one of the tokens of young love that Jack’s mother had saved from her fogged but not forgotten romance with the father of her son, all of which had all but lost their meaning as they gathered dust from storage unit to storage unit. Still, she continued to put the box in the back of the truck when it was time to act on another eviction notice, always hating herself for being so weak, but unable to discard the memories that accompanied the contents of the tattered cardboard cube.

But none of this was known to Jack as he moved slowly towards the jacket. All that he knew was the inescapable feeling of needing to look in the box. He moved without thinking towards the artifacts of his father even though he knew that the tears would come later when he stared into the abyss that was the far wall of his blackened bedroom. Dragging the jacket away from the opening, the boy’s mind flooded with an image that he would not be able to forget even in old age: the shriveled body of his father, pale and naked with his knees tucked to his chin,

lying like a rag doll inside the box. As he pulled back in fear of this imagined horror, the true contents of the box became visible. Many of the knickknacks that filled the box were indistinguishable to the boy, even though he was sure they had belonged to his father simply based on an innate certainty found only in children. This certainty had begun to fade in Jack's mind recently, gradually being replaced by the lurking shadow of doubt that comes to characterize adult life.

There was one item that immediately drew the boy's hand, however. Reaching forward instinctively, he grabbed onto the bill of his father's faded Cubs hat and held it up in front of him like an ancient relic accidentally recovered from its earthen grave. Jack's father almost always appeared wearing the stained cap in his mind's eye, sometimes worn forward while sitting on the couch watching TV, other times worn backwards out in the garage working on his car or talking with Uncle Mike.

Not many of these memories were genuine, since Jack had only been five when his mother had sat him down and explained how his dad had gotten into an awful car accident and the doctors were trying their hardest to save him. Jack had pleaded with his mother to let him go see Daddy in the hospital, but Mommy had always said that he wasn't well enough for visitors. After a couple days of worried questions and tentative answers, Daddy finally died. Since then, Jack relied exclusively on his own fictionalized memories and his mom's secret photo album that he had frequently caught her looking at in her bedroom in the months after Daddy's accident. She always kept the album close to her bed in every rented room she had occupied in the years after, and Jack always made sure to locate the album in the first days living in every new apartment they had stayed in for the last seven years. He feared losing his father's face to the increasingly thickening fog of his mind.

His favorite photograph was one of his mother and father standing in front of his childhood house before he was born, both smiling with a lack of self-consciousness that is only found on the faces of people truly satisfied with their current hand in life. They both looked straight back into the camera with the faux wood door standing proudly between them as a symbol of their accomplishment: a young couple with the naïve illusion of financial stability, confident enough in their love for each other to purchase a small house in the south suburbs of Chicago. Either because Jack had trouble remembering his face at all or because Jack preferred this image to reality, Jack's father almost always appeared in his head with this look on his face, head adorned with the very cap that the boy now held in his hands.

Slowly unsnapping the strip on the back of the hat and fitting it to his own head, Jack was lost in his fantasy of his father when he heard the sound come from behind him. Suddenly he snapped back. He was still in The Cage, which suddenly felt smaller than it ever had before. He spun around for the second time in minutes to find himself staring directly into a pair of jet black eyes gleaming out from between two file folders, little glossy black beads reflecting the

fluorescent bulbs striped across the ceiling of the corridor. But it was not the eyes that made the boy squeak in terror. It was the teeth. Two long, slender white strips that looked alien on the creature's snout, as if something had smashed them into its nose long ago and they had since become stuck there for eternity. And then they moved and the creature released a screech louder and longer than the one the boy had made, like the sound of a sharp wind rustling through dried leaves pressed tightly against a chain link fence. Frozen prior, the boy scrambled towards the door of The Cage, squeezing past the plastic chairs and ten-speed bike frame that blocked his path. Neglecting to replace the lock and completely forgetting about the saucepan that had initially been the motivation for this mission, the boy sprinted down the corridor of trash cells that would now be filled with screeching creatures for months to come, up all five flights of stairs, and down the fourth-floor hallway until he was safely inside his apartment.

"Jack? Is that you? You got the pan?" his mother called from around the corner just inside the door. Instead of waiting for her son to reply, she simply poked her head out of the doorway to the kitchen with the question still on her eyebrows. Her brows quickly lowered into a furrow of concern when she saw her son pale and sweating, standing against the cheap beige door. "Is everything okay, Jackie? Why are you breathing so heavy?" But her eyes began to soften as she recognized the hat propped gently on her son's head.

"I got scared," Jack breathed, eyes fixed on the white toes of his sneakers. "Sorry I couldn't find the pan." He didn't want to tell her the truth about the awful monster that had revealed itself and undoubtedly wanted to sink its two-by-four planks of porcelain into his flesh. Most of all he didn't want to remember the sound that had escaped from behind those white teeth.

Mary could tell that her son was hiding something, but at this point she didn't want to push the subject any further. Any discussion of how or why he had found Rick's ball cap or any other relics of her past life might have caused her to spend the remainder of the day in bed staring at the off-white contours of her bedroom wall or, even worse, looking through their photo album. Eyes still swimming with the fog of feelings all too clear in her memory, she decided on, "Come help your mother in the kitchen."