

“Go to the Rats”

Mrs. Frisby began nervously, trying to arrange her thoughts:

“It’s about my youngest son, Timothy. He is sick, too sick to leave his bed. And Moving Day is only five days off.”

“Wait,” said the owl. “Moving from where? Moving to where?”

“From the garden patch, where we’re living, to the edge of the pasture by the stream.”

“Which garden?” It had not occurred to Mrs. Frisby until now that a bird, flying freely over miles of countryside, would look down on many gardens.

"It belongs to Mr. Fitzgibbon."

"The one with the large stone?"

"Yes. My house is near the stone."

"What makes you so sure Moving Day will come in five days?"

Mrs. Frisby told him about the tractor, and what Mr. Fitzgibbon had said: five days until plowing. "Of course," she added, "it might turn cold again, and freeze, or even snow . . ."

"No," said the owl, sounding quite sure, "it will not. The wild onions are already up in the pastures." He asked her then what kind of house she had, and exactly where it was in relation to the big stone; apparently he knew the spot well.

But the more she talked to him, the more Mrs. Frisby became convinced that he would produce no solution to her problem. It had been foolish of her to think he could, foolish of her to come at all. Because, she thought, there really *was* no solution. At last she fell silent, and the owl asked no more questions. Finally he said:

"Lying where it does, your house will inevitably be turned up by the plow, and probably broken to bits in the process. There is no feasible way to prevent this. My only advice to you is this: If you stay in the house you will surely be crushed and killed, all of you. Therefore, it is better to take your chances with moving. Wrap your son Timothy up as warmly as you can, help him as much as possible on the journey, and hope for warm weather on Moving Day. That way you are at least sure to save yourself and the other children."

The owl paused, turned away from her and looked again at the entrance to his hollow; the patch of light it

admitted was growing steadily dimmer.

"And now, if you will excuse me—the night is falling, and I have no more time to spare. I regret that I can not give you a more satisfactory solution to your problem. Good evening, Mrs. . . ." he paused. "I don't believe you told me your name."

"Mrs. Frisby." The poor mouse spoke with a sob in her throat, for the owl had said exactly what she feared he would say. And she had no real hope for Timothy. The owl had said, in effect: Either Timothy alone must die, or they must all die together. Even if Moving Day should be extraordinarily warm, the nights were sure to be frosty, and that would be the end of him. Still, one must be polite, and she added sadly, "I thank you, sir, for listening to me. . . ."

But at the mention of her name an extraordinary change had come over the owl. He turned back to face her again and stared at her most intently. Indeed, he gave an agitated flutter of his wings and half flew, half hopped closer to her, bending forward until his great sharp beak was only a few inches from her face. Mrs. Frisby shrank back in fear. What had she done wrong?

"Did you say Mrs. Frisby?"

"Yes. You asked my name."

"Related to Jonathan Frisby?"

"Yes. He was my husband. He died last summer. He was Timothy's father. But how did you know about him?"

"That is not important," said the owl, drawing back a little and looking at her in a new way—almost as if with deference. "I will say this: His name was not unknown in these woods. And if you are his widow, that

puts matters in a different light."

Something in the way he said this caused Mrs. Frisby's hopes to lift a little.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean, madame, that there is a way that your son's life might just possibly be saved. I did not mention it to you because I saw no way you could conceivably do it, and I did not want to arouse false hope. But if you are Jonathan Frisby's widow—then perhaps it can be done."

"I don't understand at all," said Mrs. Frisby. "What is this thing?"

"It is not a thing that I can do myself. You must go to the rats."

"To the rats? But I don't know any rats. They have nothing to do with me."

"I don't doubt that. They have little to do with anyone except themselves, and will have less as time goes on. Nonetheless, I think they will help you, and if they will, they can."

"But what can they do?"

"They must move your house to a place where it will be safe from the plow."

Now Mrs. Frisby's spirits fell again, and she said, almost bitterly:

"You are joking, sir; you are not serious. No rat could move my house. It is far too heavy, much too big."

"The rats on Mr. Fitzgibbon's farm have—things—ways—you know nothing about. They are not like the rest of us. They are not, I think, even like most other rats. They work at night, in secret. Mrs. Frisby, do you know their main entrance?"

"In the rosebush? Yes."

"Go there. You will find a sentry guarding the door. His name is Justin. Tell him who you are, and that you come at my request. Tell him that you want to see a rat named Nicodemus. I think they will let you in, though they may insist on swearing you to secrecy. If they should ask that, you must of course use your own judgement; but my advice would be to do as they ask."

Mrs. Frisby was close to complete bewilderment.

"Secrecy," she said. "Secrecy about what?"

"That I cannot reveal. I, too, have agreed to it. Also, there is much I do not know, though I have given advice on certain aspects of their—projects."

"Well," said Mrs. Frisby, "I don't understand at all. But if it might save Timothy, I will try to do what you say."

"Tell them," added the owl, "that I suggest moving the house into the lee of the stone. Remember that—the lee of the stone. Also, do not forget the names: Justin and Nicodemus."

"Justin. Nicodemus. The lee of the stone," repeated Mrs. Frisby. "I will remember." She was now so entirely puzzled that she did not think to ask what the phrase meant. Presumably the rats would know.



"And, Mrs. Frisby," said the owl, moving again toward the entrance to the hollow, "please understand: I was an admirer of your late husband, though I never met him in person. I wish you well. I hope your son's life can be saved. You see, I can understand your particular need, for I face a similar problem."

"You?" said Mrs. Frisby. "But you have no Moving Day."

"I have lived in this tree, in this same hollow," the owl said, "for more years than anyone can remember. But now, when the wind blows hard in winter and rocks the forest, I sit here in the dark, and from deep down in the bole, down near the roots, I hear a new sound. It is the sound of strands of wood creaking in the cold and snapping one by one. The limbs are falling; the tree is old, and it is dying. Yet I cannot bring myself, after so many years, to leave, to find a new home and move into it, perhaps to fight for it. I, too, have grown old. One of these days, one of these years, the tree will fall, and when it does, if I am still alive, I will fall with it."

With this sad prediction the owl stepped through his doorway, spread his great wings and was gone, soaring silently downward into the shadowy woods below.

Mrs. Frisby followed him out onto the limb. To her relief, Jeremy was still waiting where she had left him, though not very patiently.

"We must hurry," he said. "It's almost dark. I'm not supposed to be out so late." Mrs. Frisby, who had the same feeling, climbed on his back, much less afraid now for two reasons: First, she was getting used to air travel; second, since the woods below them were dark, she could no longer see how far away the ground was.

"He talked to you for a long time," said Jeremy as they flew. "Did he tell you anything that will help?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Frisby. Since the owl had brought up the matter of secrecy, and had, in fact, been secretive himself, she was not sure just how much she should tell Jeremy.

"Why don't you know?"

"I mean, he told me some things, but I don't know whether they'll help or not." She decided to counter with a question of her own. "What does 'in the lee' mean?"

Jeremy, being like all birds knowledgeable about the wind, knew the answer to that. "It means the calm side, the side the wind doesn't blow from. When there's a strong wind, you fly up to the barn from the lee, so you don't get bashed into the wall. My father taught me that."

"I see," said Mrs. Frisby, and she became more puzzled than ever. What had the wind to do with it?

"He told me," she said finally, deciding it could do no harm, "to go and see the rats."

"The rats?" Jeremy was startled. "But they don't have anything to do with us."

"I know. But he thought they might help."

"What could they do?"

"He thought they might move my whole house. But how they could do it, I can't imagine."

"Oh, I don't doubt that they *could*," said Jeremy. "Everyone knows—at least all the birds know—that the rats can do things. They're up to something; nobody is quite sure what. For one thing, they're building themselves a new house, way back in the woods, over the

mountains. They've even made quite a big clearing near it. I'd show you, but it's too dark now.

"They used to carry food, like the rest of us. But now we see them with other things—pieces of metal, and bits of machinery, and things I can't even recognize. They take them into that rosebush, and what happens to them I don't know. But the owl knows more than most. I expect he's had some dealings with them. Just the same, I've never heard of their helping anybody but themselves."

"Neither have I. But I'm going to ask them anyway. There isn't anyone else to ask."

By the time they reached the garden, it had gone almost completely dark, and Jeremy could not linger.

"Good night, Jeremy," said Mrs. Frisby, feeling almost affectionate toward the crow. "Thank you for taking me, and for waiting to bring me back."

"You're welcome," said Jeremy. "If you need me again, just ask. After all, if it weren't for you, I wouldn't be here to ask." And he flew off into the darkness, the last crow to get home that night.

In the Rosebush

When Mrs. Frisby got home, Teresa, Martin and Cynthia were eating supper, as she had told them to do if it got dark before she returned. Coming silently down the tunnel, she could hear them talking in the room below, and she paused a moment to eavesdrop on their conversation. Obviously Cynthia had been worrying, and Teresa was reassuring her.

"She couldn't have got back sooner than this, Cynn timer. Don't you remember? The crow said it was a *mile* to the tree. It might even be farther."

"Yes, but crows fly so fast."

"But if he went two miles high"—that was Martin—

"it would be three miles altogether."

"Six," said Teresa. "Two up, two down, and one to get there and one to get back."

"That's right. No wonder she isn't back yet."

"But what about the owl? You know how owls are."

"It was still light when they got there. He couldn't see."

"But it's dark now," said Cynthia. "Oh, I *wish* she'd come back. I'm scared."

"Not so loud," Teresa said. "Timothy will hear."

"I'm home," called Mrs. Frisby, hurrying the rest of the way down.

And now it appeared that they had all been worried, for they ran to her, and even Martin, who ordinarily avoided such displays, threw his arms around her.

"Oh, Mother," cried Cynthia, near tears. "I was so worried."

"Poor Cynthia. It's all right."

"How high did you fly?" asked Martin, recovering quickly.

"High enough so the trees looked like bushes, the garden like a postcard, and the river like a snake."

"Did you see the owl? What did he say?"

"I saw him. Later, I'll tell you about it. First I want to see Timothy. How is he? Why didn't you move his bed out here?"

Teresa said: "I wanted to, but he said he'd rather stay in the bedroom. I think he's feeling worse again."

But when Mrs. Frisby went to see him, she found him sitting up, and his forehead felt not at all feverish.

"I'm all right," he said. "I stayed in here because I wanted to think about something."

"Think about what?"

"About Moving Day."

"Moving Day! But why? What about it?"

Had he, after all, overheard her talking to the others? Heard about her flight to the owl? But no, he was explaining.

"I haven't been outdoors since I got sick, so I don't know what it's like. I mean the weather. But today, this afternoon, I noticed something."

"What was that?"

"A smell in the air, a warm, wet smell. If you sniff you can still smell it, though it's not so strong now."

Mrs. Frisby had noticed this, of course, both indoors and out.

"It's the smell of the frost melting," Timothy went on. "I remember it from last year. And after that, it wasn't long until we moved. Mother, when are we going to move this year?"

"Oh, not for a long time yet." Mrs. Frisby tried to sound as casual as she could. "It's still much too cold, too early to think about it."

"I have to think about it," said Timothy. He sounded serious, but calm and unworried. "Because if it comes too soon, I don't know if I can go. I tried walking a little bit today, in here, when the others were outside."

"Timothy, you're supposed to stay in bed! You'll make yourself sick again."

"I know, I know. But I had to find out. And I didn't walk much. I couldn't. I only went a few steps, and I got so dizzy I had to lie down again."

"Of course you did. You haven't really recovered yet."

"I guess I haven't. That's why I wanted to think."

"Timothy, you *must* not worry about it. That will only make you worse."

"I'm not worried at all. I thought I would be, but I'm not—or maybe I think I should be, but I can't. What I really think about is how nice it is there, in the summer beside the brook, and it's true, I want to go. But I'm not scared. I was afraid you might be, or that you might think I was. That's really what I wanted to tell you. I'm just going to wait and see what happens. So you shouldn't worry about it, either."

Mrs. Frisby realized that he had somehow switched their positions. He had seen the danger he was in—guessed, somehow, that Moving Day was near, and that he was very likely to die. And yet here he was—reassuring her. She wanted to tell him about the owl and the rats, tell him that something still might be done. But she decided she had better not; she did not really know if they would help. It would be better to wait until she had seen them.

So instead she said, rather lamely: "Timothy, don't think about it any more. When the time comes, we'll see how you are and then decide what to do."

The next morning at daybreak she went to see the rats. She had never been in the rosebush before, never even really close to it, and now, the nearer she got, the more nervous she became. No one had ever told her—nor, as far as she knew, told any of the other animals—to keep away from it. It was just something one knew. The rats on Mr. Fitzgibbon's farm kept to themselves. One did not prowl in their domain.

She had, before coming out of the garden, looked around carefully to be sure Dragon was nowhere in sight. But even Dragon, though he would chase a rat up to the edge of the bush, would not follow him into it.

The thorns, of course, helped to discourage trespassers. Mrs. Frisby had never realized until that moment, standing next to it, how very big the bush was, how dense, how incredibly thorny. It was bigger than the tractor shed, and its branches were so densely intertwined that as small as she was, Mrs. Frisby could find no easy way to crawl into it, though she walked all the way around it looking. She remembered approximately where she had seen the rats go in, and she studied that part of the bush carefully. How had they done it?

Then she saw that on one branch, close to the ground, the thorns had been scraped off, and about a half-inch of it—just big enough for a handhold—was worn smooth. She put her hand on this and pushed timidly. The branch yielded easily, rather like a swinging door, and behind it she saw a trail, a sort of tunnel through the bush, wide enough so that she could walk into it without touching thorns on either side. When she went forward, she released the branch, and it swung back silently into place behind her. She was inside the bush, and it was dark.

She walked forward, peering into the dimness and following the small trail which wound in a curving course toward the center of the bush, its earthen floor packed firm by the pressure of small feet. Then, straight ahead of her, she saw the entrance.

She had expected—what? A round hole in the dirt, most likely, but certainly nothing like what she saw.



First, a sizeable clearing—about five feet across—had been cut from the center of the bush. Branches overhead had been cleared away, too, not quite to the top of the bush but almost, so that the sunlight filtered through easily, and soft moss grew on the ground. In the middle of this bright green cave rose a small mound, eight inches tall, in the end of which was an arched entrance neatly lined with stone, like a small doorway without any door. Behind the entrance a tunnel, its floor also lined with stones, led backward and downward.

Beside the entranceway, looking at her with dark, unblinking eyes, stood the biggest rat she had ever seen.

Brutus

Stop where you are," said the rat. "How did you get in here?"

"I walked in," said Mrs. Frisby, keeping her voice calm with an effort. "I found a branch with the thorns smoothed off. I pushed it back, and found . . ."

"I know," said the rat, rather rudely. "And now, walk out again. You aren't allowed in here." He moved a few inches toward her, placing himself between her and the entrance. She noticed how powerful his muscles looked under his glossy coat. He would almost be a match for Dragon—almost, but not quite.

"Go on," he repeated.

"But I have a reason . . ."

"I don't care what you have. Go away. You're small. I wouldn't want to hurt you."

"Are you Justin?" Mrs. Frisby inched back as the rat inched forward.

"I'm Brutus. Justin's not here." That was reasonably obvious, Mrs. Frisby thought. The rat named Brutus added: "You know Justin?"

"No," said Mrs. Frisby. "That is, not exactly."

"If you don't know him, how do you know his name?" Brutus sounded puzzled, and Mrs. Frisby observed that although he was greatly oversized and muscular, and his eyes were bright enough, he looked very young.

"It was told to me by a friend. Can I see him?"

"Justin? No. He's at a meeting. I'm taking his place. They're all at a meeting but me."

Bad luck, thought Mrs. Frisby. He's a substitute. She said:

"Then I'll wait for him."

"No," said Brutus. "You can't stay here. I've got orders. Now go, or I'll have to take you out myself." He moved forward again.

"My name," said the mouse desperately, "is Mrs. Jonathan Frisby. I want to see Nicodemus." It did not work.

"I don't care what your name is, and you can't see Nicodemus, that's sure." Brutus now looked both puzzled and annoyed. "Move on, and be quick."

"All right," said Mrs. Frisby. "You needn't force me. I'll go." She turned slowly and walked back the way she had come. She felt like crying—after coming all this way, after flying to see the owl, to be turned back so

abruptly at the end. She thought, as she walked into the darker part of the bush, maybe she could just wait for an hour or so, until the meeting (what kind of a meeting could it be?) was over and then go back, and perhaps the rat named Justin would be at the entrance then. But would Justin pay any more attention to her than Brutus had done? She had a feeling that he would.

But when she stopped she heard footsteps behind her. She looked back and saw that Brutus was following her, so she started again, hurrying to keep out of his sight. After a while she paused again and listened. This time there was no sound. He must have gone back to his post. She sat down on the ground.

Then, ahead of her, in the direction of the place where she had entered the bush, she heard a rustle, a faint scraping noise. It was the branch she had pushed to get in. Someone else was moving it. Someone was coming in, walking along the narrow path toward her. It must be another rat. Suddenly she was terrified. What would he do, meeting her unexpectedly in this dimness?

She shrank to one side, as close as she could get to the wall of thorns, hoping that whoever it was might go on past, not seeing her.

Then he came around the curve, and she saw him. It was her old friend, Mr. Ages, the white mouse.

He was moving extremely slowly, and she realized that he was limping badly. One of his legs was injured; it was wrapped up in splints and bandaged.

"Mr. Ages," she called softly, "it's Mrs. Frisby."

"Who?" He peered into the shadow. "I can't see you."

"Mrs. Frisby." She moved into the middle of the path in front of him.



"Why, so it is. Mrs. Frisby. How do you do?" He sounded cordial enough, but he was startled. "I didn't know that you . . . How do you happen to be in here?"

"It's a long story."

"Then tell it to me while I rest. I'm supposed to be at a meeting, but I'm late already, and a few minutes more won't matter. As you can see, I had a bad fall and broke my ankle."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I hope it doesn't hurt."

"It is mending. But I can walk only slowly and need to rest frequently." He sat down with a sigh. "Now tell me what you're doing in the rats' bush."

Mrs. Frisby (who was wondering the same thing about him) told him as briefly as she could about Timothy, Jeremy, the owl, and Brutus. Mr. Ages listened in silence, interrupting only once.

"You went *into* the owl's tree?"

"Yes. But I was afraid."

"I should think so. That took courage."

"I had to do it."

When she had finished her story, Mr. Ages sat quietly for a minute, considering it.

"Poor Timothy," he said at last. "I should have

thought of that myself. But, of course, when I gave you the medicine, the weather had not yet turned warm. Then I fell and broke my leg, and I forgot all about it." He stood up.

"I think," he said, "that you should come with me back to the entrance."

"But I can't. Brutus will still be there."

"Mrs. Frisby, having done all that you have done, you are not going to give up now. I'll talk to Brutus."

"You know him?"

"I have known him since he was born. He's not very old, you know. I think he will do what I ask." From the way he said this, Mrs. Frisby could tell he did not merely think it, he knew it. But how?

"All right," she said doubtfully. "I'll try again. But I don't understand. How do you know Brutus?"

"We had better move along." They started back toward the entrance at Mr. Ages' slow, limping pace. "As to how I know Brutus—that's a much longer story than yours, and I doubt that I'm the one to tell it to you. It is for Nicodemus to say.

"But I will tell you this: If we go in the entrance—as we will, if you are to ask for help—you must promise that you will never tell anyone anything at all about what you see and hear."

"I will promise," said Mrs. Frisby. Again, she thought, she had no choice. "The owl told me that, too."

When they approached the entrance again, Mrs. Frisby saw that Brutus stood at his post as before, but that another rat had joined him. Two of them, she thought. I hope Mr. Ages knows them both. The new rat saw them coming. He looked alert, dark gray in color, and ex-

traordinarily handsome, though not so huge as Brutus.

"Mr. Ages," he said. "How's the leg?"

"Better. But it will be a while before I can run again."

"Justin," said Brutus, staring at Mrs. Frisby. "There she is. That's the one I was telling you about."

"Is she now." Justin looked at her casually. He did not sound particularly alarmed.

"Mrs. Frisby," said Mr. Ages formally, "may I present my friends Justin and Brutus?"

"How do you do?" Brutus sounded doubtful.

"Mrs. Frisby?" said Justin. "Not Mrs. Jonathan Frisby?"

"She is Mrs. Jonathan Frisby," said Mr. Ages. "A widow, as you know."

"Madame," said Justin, bowing politely, "it is an honor to meet you."

Brutus now looked astonished. "You both know her? Who is she?"

"Brutus," said Mr. Ages gently, "don't you remember Mr. Jonathan?"

Brutus wrinkled his brow. "Mr. Jonathan? You mean the one Dragon . . ."

"Yes," said Justin quickly. "And this is Mrs. Jonathan."

"Oh," said Brutus. Then, to Mrs. Frisby: "Why didn't you *tell* me. I wouldn't have chased you off."

"Well," said Mrs. Frisby, "I did try. But it doesn't matter."

"No," Mr. Ages added. "Because on the way out she met me coming in. She needs to talk to Nicodemus—and quickly."

Brutus looked doubtful again. "Nicodemus? But can

she? I mean, how about the rules? What about the Plan?"

Mr. Ages said: "That has been taken care of. She has promised secrecy, and she is to be trusted completely. That I, myself, guarantee. After all, consider who she is." As an afterthought he added, ". . . and who her children are."

Who am I, then? Mrs. Frisby asked herself in wonder. I suppose that, too, will have to come from Nicodemus.

Mr. Ages said to Justin: "What about the meeting? It can't be over already."

"It was temporarily adjourned," said Justin, "to wait for you. In fact, I came to find you."

"Then I suppose we had better go in."

Justin led the way through the arched entrance, with Mrs. Frisby and Mr. Ages following. Brutus remained outside at his post.

In the Library

The tunnel led gently downward, and after the first dozen steps they were in darkness. Mrs. Frisby could see nothing at all. Behind her Mr. Ages limped along; ahead she could hear the scuffle of Justin's footsteps. She followed the sound blindly. Then she heard his voice.

"Just walk straight forward, Mrs. Frisby. There's nothing to trip over, and nothing to bump into. If you get off course, you'll feel the wall." He added: "The dark part doesn't last long."

Now what did he mean by that? She thought it over for a minute or two as she walked and had just decided to ask him, when to her surprise she saw ahead of her a

faint glow. A light! But how could there be a light down so far? "There, we're through it," said Justin cheerfully. "I know that blackout bit must be annoying the first time, but it's necessary."

"But aren't we under the ground?"

"Oh yes. About three feet down by now, I'd guess."

"Then how can it be light?"

"I could tell you," Justin said, "but if you'll wait fifteen seconds, you'll see for yourself."

In a few more steps the tunnel—Mrs. Frisby could now discern, dimly, its shape and direction—took a turn to the right, and she did see for herself. She stopped in astonishment.

Ahead of her stretched a long, well-lit hallway. Its ceiling and walls were a smoothly curved arch, its floor hard and flat, with a soft layer of carpet down the middle. The light came from the walls, where every foot or so on both sides a tiny light bulb had been recessed and the hole in which it stood, like a small window, had been covered with a square of colored glass—blue, green or yellow. The effect was that of stained-glass windows in sunlight.

Justin was watching her and smiling. "Do you like it? The carpet and the colored glass we don't really need. Some of the wives did that on their own, just for looks. They cut the glass, believe it or not, from old bottles. The carpet was a piece of trim they found somewhere."

"It's beautiful," Mrs. Frisby said. "But how . . ."

"We've had electricity for four years now."

"Five," said Mr. Ages.

"Five," said Justin agreeably. "The lights"—they were

the very small, very bright twinkling kind—"we found on trees. In fact, most of our lights come from trees. Not until after Christmas, of course—about New Year's. The big light bulbs we have trouble handling."

Mrs. Frisby was familiar with electricity (her husband, who knew all kinds of things, had once explained it to her). At night she had seen the lamps shining in Mr. Fitzgibbon's house, and at Christmas time the lights that his sons strung on a pine tree outside.

"You mean you just took them?" she asked.

"We were careful to take only a few from each tree," said Mr. Ages.

"It was like picking fruit," Justin said rather dreamily. "The annual light bulb harvest. We had to go quite far up the road before we had enough. Even so, it took two Christmases."

"Justin," said Mr. Ages, "I think we'd better get on."

They continued along the corridor, which curved always slightly to the right, so Mrs. Frisby could never really tell how long it was, and which soon began to incline more steeply into the ground. Mrs. Frisby noticed that the air, which should have been dank and damp so deep underground, was on the contrary fresh and clean, and she thought she could even detect a very faint breeze blowing past her ears as she moved.

In a few more minutes the hall widened abruptly into a large oval chamber. Here the lights were set in the ceiling; at the far end, Mrs. Frisby could see, the long tunnel continued and looked as if it slanted upward again—perhaps to another entrance, a back door. Was this, then, their destination, the main hall of the rats? But if so, where were all the other rats? The room was

"It's all right," he said. "I should have warned you."

"But we're falling!"

"Not quite. We're going down, but we've got two strong cables and an electric motor holding us."

Still, Mrs. Frisby held her breath during the rest of the descent, until finally the small elevator came to a gentle stop and Justin opened the door. Then she breathed again and looked out.

The room before her was at least three times as big as the one they had just left, and corridors radiated from it in as many directions as petals from a daisy. Directly opposite the elevator an open arch led into what looked like a still larger room—seemingly some kind of an assembly hall, for it had a raised platform at one end.

And now there were rats. Rats by dozens—rats standing and talking in groups of twos and threes and fours, rats walking slowly, rats hurrying, rats carrying papers. As Mrs. Frisby stepped from the elevator, it became obvious that strangers were a rarity down there, for the hubbub of a dozen conversations stopped abruptly, and all heads turned to look at her. They did not look hostile, nor were they alarmed—since her two companions were familiar to them—but merely curious. Then, as quickly as it had died out, the sound of talking began again, as if the rats were too polite to stand and stare. But one of them, a lean rat with a scarred face, left his group and walked toward them.

"Justin. Mr. Ages. And I see we have a guest." He spoke graciously, with an air of quiet dignity, and Mrs. Frisby noticed two more things about him. First, the scar on his face ran across his left eye, and over this eye he wore a black patch, fastened by a cord around his

head. Second, he carried a satchel—rather like a handbag—by a strap over his shoulders.

“A guest whose name you will recognize,” said Justin. “She is Mrs. Jonathan Frisby. Mrs. Frisby, this is Nicodemus.”

“A name I recognize indeed,” said the rat called Nicodemus. “Mrs. Frisby—are you perhaps aware of this?—your late husband was one of our greatest friends. You are welcome here.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Frisby, but she was more puzzled than ever. “In fact, I did not know that you knew my husband. But I’m glad to hear it, because I’ve come to ask your help.”

“Mrs. Frisby has a problem,” said Mr. Ages. “An urgent one.”

“If we can help you, we will,” said Nicodemus. He asked Mr. Ages: “Can it wait until after the meeting? An hour? We were just ready to begin again.”

Mr. Ages considered. “An hour will make no difference, I think.”

Nicodemus said: “Justin, show Mrs. Frisby to the library, where she can be comfortable until the meeting is over.”

By this time the last of the other assembled rats had made their way into a large meeting hall, where they sat facing the raised platform. Nicodemus followed them, pulling some papers and a small reading glass from the satchel at his side as he walked to the front of the room.

Justin led Mrs. Frisby in another direction, down a corridor to their left, and again she had the impression of a faint, cool breeze against her face. She realized that the corridor she had walked in up above was merely a long

entranceway, and that the halls around her were the rats' real living quarters. The one down which Justin led her was lined with doors, one of which he opened.

"In here," he said.

The room they entered was big, square, well lit, and had a faint musty smell. "It's reasonably comfortable, and if you like to read . . ." he gestured at the walls. They were lined with shelves from floor to ceiling, and on the shelves stood—Mrs. Frisby dredged in her memory. "Books," she said. "They're books."

"Yes," said Justin. "Do you read much?"

"Only a little," said Mrs. Frisby. "My husband taught me. And the children . . ." She started to tell him how. Laboriously scratching letters in the earth with a stick—it seemed so long ago. But Justin was leaving.

"Excuse me—I've got to go to the meeting. I hate meetings, but this one's important. We're finishing up the schedule for the Plan." He pronounced it with a capital P.

"The Plan?"

But he was out the door, closing it gently behind him.

Mrs. Frisby looked around her. The room—the library, Nicodemus had called it—had, in addition to its shelves of books, several tables with benches beside them, and on these were stacked more books, some of them open.

Books. Her husband, Jonathan, had told her about them. He had taught her and the children to read (the children had mastered it quickly, but she herself could barely manage the simplest words; she had thought perhaps it was because she was older). He had also told her about electricity. He had known these things—and so, it emerged, did the rats. It had never occurred to her until

now to wonder *how* he knew them. He had always known so many things, and she had accepted that as a matter of course. But who had taught him to read? Strangely, it also emerged that he had known the rats. Had they taught him? What had been his connection with them? She remembered his long visits with Mr. Ages. And Mr. Ages knew the rats, too.

She sighed. Perhaps when the meeting was over and she had had a chance to talk to Nicodemus—and had told him about Timothy and Moving Day—perhaps when that was settled, he could explain all this to her.

She noticed at the far end of the room a section of wall where there were no bookshelves. There was, instead, a blackboard, covered with words and numbers written in white chalk. There were pieces of chalk and an eraser in a rack at the bottom of it. The blackboard stood near the end of the longest of the tables. Was the library also used as a classroom? When she looked at the blackboard and, rather laboriously, read what was written on it, she saw that it was not. It was, rather, a conference room.

At the top of the board, in large letters, were printed the words:

THE PLAN OF THE RATS OF NIMH.

Isabella

Mrs. Frisby spelled it out slowly: The Plan of the Rats of Nimh. What, or where, was Nimh? The name had a strange and faraway sound. Had these rats, then, come here from someplace else? Did that explain why they had books and electric lights and wires and an electric motor? Yet they had been here—or at least there had been rats here—for as long as she could remember. Still, that was not so very long.

She wondered what other things they had. Suddenly she had an almost overwhelming desire to look around—to see what was behind the other doors and down the other corridors. She went to the door, opened it, and

looked out into the hall. It was entirely deserted and silent, except that when she listened carefully she could hear a faint humming in the distance, as if something were running—another motor?

She started out into the hall, and then changed her mind. Better not. Nicodemus had been friendly—they had all been friendly—but explicit. He had said she was to wait in the library. And she was not there to pry but to get help. She went back into the library, closed the door, and sat on one of the benches. The books on the table were mostly paperbacks—small enough so that the rats could handle them easily enough, but too big for her; so she sat in front of the blackboard and looked at it again.

Beneath the title across the top, in neatly chalked handwriting, were columns of words and figures:

Schedule

January:

Group 1 (10):	Oats.	30 loads = 2 bu.
Group 2 (10):	Wheat.	30 loads = 2 bu.
Group 3 (10):	Corn.	20 loads = 1½ bu.
Group 4 (10):	Misc. seeds	Est. 10 loads total

The rest of the blackboard was filled with more rows of figures, each headed by the name of a month: February, March, April, May, and so on through July. At the bottom a separate square was ruled off:

Plows (Arthur's group) (14)
Plow No. 2. Complete: Jan. 1

Plow No. 3. Complete: Feb. 10

Plow No. 4. Complete: Mar. 20

Mrs. Frisby stared at all this, trying to make head or tail of it, but she could not. It was quite incomprehensible.

She was still puzzling over it when the door opened and a rat came in. It was a girl-rat, small and quite young, judging by her looks. She was carrying a pencil and some papers and looking at the papers as she walked, so that she did not see Mrs. Frisby at first. When she did she gasped and dropped the papers, scattering them on the floor. Her eyes opened wide.

"Who are you?" she asked. "I don't know you. How did you get in?" She backed toward the door.



"It's all right," said Mrs. Frisby. "I'm a friend of Mr. Ages." The rat was very young indeed, only a child.

"But why are you in here? Who let you in?"

"Nicodemus. He told me to wait here."

The girl-rat looked doubtful. "You might be a spy."

"A spy! How could I be? A spy from where?"

"I don't know. From outside. Maybe from Nimh?"

"I don't even know what Nimh is."

"That's what you *say*."

"But I don't. What is it?" asked Mrs. Frisby, feeling slightly annoyed.

"It's a place." The girl-rat, her alarm apparently subsiding, began picking up her scattered papers. "I'm supposed to be practicing my reading."

"What kind of a place?"

"It's where we came from. I don't know too much about it. I've never been there."

"How can you come from there if you've never been there?"

"My father and mother did. I was born afterward. I think it's white. Anyway, I know one thing. We don't want to go back. We don't want to get caught."

So, Mrs. Frisby thought—that sounds as if, whatever Nimh was, the rats had escaped from it to come here. But she realized that she was not likely to get very clear information from such a child. Again, she hoped that Nicodemus would explain it.

"Did Nicodemus come from Nimh, too?"

"Yes."

"And Justin?"

"Yes. You know Justin?"

"Yes."

"I guess you're not a spy," said the girl-rat. She sounded mildly disappointed. Then she added irrelevantly: "Justin's not married." She climbed on one of the benches and opened a book. "He's the best one of all. He's not even afraid of Dragon." She read in the book for perhaps thirty seconds, picked up her pencil, then put it down again. "I'm too young to get married."

"I suppose so," said Mrs. Frisby. "For a while yet. But that won't last long."

"That's what my mother says. But it *seems* long. And Justin might marry somebody else."

"Maybe not," said Mrs. Frisby, who could see beyond the tip of her nose. "He's pretty young himself yet. What's your name?"

"Isabella."

"It's a pretty name."

"It's all right. Only my brother calls me Izzy. I don't like that."

"I don't wonder. Where's your brother?"

"At the meeting. He's older. All the men are at the meeting. But my mother didn't go. The mothers don't always go. She's in the grain room, packing grain."

"Packing grain?"

"For the Plan. She doesn't like the Plan, though."

The Plan again.

"What is the Plan? Why doesn't she like it?"

"It's just—the Plan. For where we're going to live and all that. She doesn't like it because she says it's too hard—no more electric lights, no more refrigerator, no more running water. But she isn't deserting or anything. Not like Jenner. We didn't like Jenner."

"Who's Jenner?"

"He was in the group, but he quit. Maybe he went back to Nimh. We don't know."

Mrs. Frisby was gradually getting a picture of life in the rat colony—a somewhat confusing one because Isabella was a child, but nonetheless certain things were apparent: They had a grain room (presumably for food storage); the females sometimes went to meetings and sometimes not; Nicodemus seemed to be the leader; they had a Plan for the future that some rats did not like; and one, named Jenner, had deserted. Or had others gone with him? She was about to ask Isabella when the library door opened and Nicodemus, Justin, and Mr. Ages entered. Another rat came with them, a stranger.

A Powder for Dragon

The strange rat was named Arthur. He was stocky, square and muscular, with bright, hard eyes. He looked efficient.

"You might call him our chief engineer," said Nicodemus to Mrs. Frisby, "as, indeed, you might call Justin the captain of the guard—if we had any such titles, but we don't. Mr. Ages thought Arthur should come along, though he didn't say why. So we still don't know what your problem is."

Isabella was gone. She had dropped her papers on the floor again when the others had entered, and Justin, to her intense confusion and visible delight, had helped her

pick them up.

"Hello, Izzy," he had said. "How's the reading coming?"

"It's fine," she said. "I finished the Third Reader last week. Now I'm on the Fourth."

"The Fourth Reader already! You're getting quite grown up!" At that she had almost dropped the papers a third time and made a dash for the door. It did not matter, Mrs. Frisby noticed, if Justin called her Izzy—just so he called her something.

Nicodemus closed the door behind her, then sat down on one of the benches, facing Mrs. Frisby; the others sat down, too, Mr. Ages stretching his splinted leg in front of him. Nicodemus took the reading glass from his satchel, opened it, and through it gravely examined Mrs. Frisby's face. "You will forgive the glass and the scrutiny," he said. "When I lost my left eye, I also damaged the right one; I can see little close-up without the glass—indeed, not very much even with it." At length he folded the glass and put it on the table.

"Now," he said, "what is it we can do to help you?"

So Mrs. Frisby recounted once more the events that had led to her coming there, and at the end repeated what the owl had advised her to say—"move the house into the lee of the stone."

She added: "I don't understand just what he meant by that. Jeremy—the crow—says it means the side where there's no wind. But what good would that do?"

"I think I know what he meant," said Nicodemus. "In a broad sense, lee means the sheltered side. A bird, flying over Mrs. Fitzgibbon's garden, would notice something most of us would miss."

He reached into his satchel and took out a sheet of paper and a pencil; he opened the reading glass again. As he talked, he drew a sketch:

"When a farmer plows a field with a big rock in it, he plows around the rock—close on each side, but leaving a triangle of unplowed land on each end.

"Mrs. Frisby's house is beside the rock, and will get plowed up—and probably crushed, as the owl said. But if we can move it a few feet—so that it lies buried *behind* the rock—in the lee—then she and her children can stay in it as long as they need to.

"From the air, the way the owl sees it, the garden would look like this." He inspected the sketch through the reading glass and then placed it on the table.

Mrs. Frisby climbed up on the bench and looked at it. It was a rough map, showing the garden, the big stone near the middle, and the way the furrows made by the plow would curve around it, rather like waves around a boat.

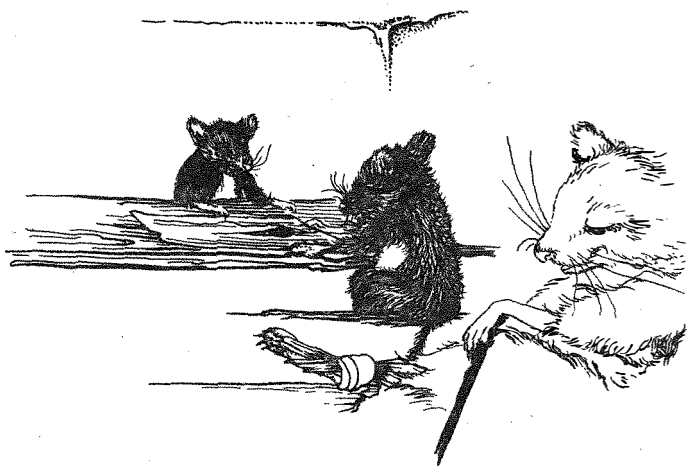
"Show me where your house is buried," said Nicodemus. Mrs. Frisby pointed to the spot on the sketch.

"I know where that cinder block is," said the rat named Arthur. "In fact, I thought about bringing it in, but I decided it was too long a haul. They had it tied on top of the harrow for weight, and it fell off just as they were finishing the garden."

"Can you move it," asked Nicodemus, pointing at the sketch, "to this spot right here, and bury it again?"

"Yes," said Arthur. "That shouldn't be hard."

Mrs. Frisby was delighted; looking at the map, it all became clear, and she could see what a beautifully simple idea it was. When Mr. Fitzgibbon plowed, he



would go right past their house; they would not have to move until Timothy was well and until the weather was truly warm. She remembered again what her husband had said—how easy to unlock a door when you have the key. She had found the key. Or rather, the owl had found it.

Nicodemus asked Arthur: "How long will it take?"

"Depends. With a party of ten, a couple of hours. With twenty, maybe an hour."

"We can spare twenty. But it's still too long." He looked worried.

So did Arthur. "Yes," he said. "We'll have to work at night—but even so . . . There's just no cover at all. It's wide open."

"We'll have to take care of Dragon," said Justin.

"Yes," said Mr. Ages, "and with this leg, I can't do it. I'd never make it to the bowl, much less get back again."

Mrs. Frisby, looking at their baffled faces, felt her delight subsiding. Obviously something was wrong.

"I don't understand," she said. "I know about Dragon, of course, but . . ."

"At night," said Justin, "Dragon prowls the farmyard like a tiger. And you don't see him until he's on top of you."

"Then you can't move my house after all."

"Well," Justin said, "ordinarily . . ." He turned to Nicodemus. "Should I explain it to her?"

"Yes," said Nicodemus.

"Ordinarily," said Justin, "when we have a long project to do at night—sometimes even by day—we make sure Dragon won't bother us: We put sleeping powder in his food. Mr. Ages makes it. It doesn't do the cat any harm; but he stays extremely drowsy for the next eight hours or so. We station a sentry to watch him, and we're free to work."

"You did it yesterday!" cried Mrs. Frisby, remembering the figures toiling the wire through the grass, remembering how strangely disinterested Dragon had seemed when he saw her. "I saw the cat sleeping in the yard."

"Yes," said Justin, "but today Mr. Ages has a broken leg."

"Then he can't make the powder?"

"It isn't that," said Mr. Ages. "I've plenty of the powder."

"The trouble is," said Justin, "it's Mr. Ages who puts

it in Dragon's dinner bowl, inside the farm kitchen. With his leg broken, he can't move fast enough."

"But why Mr. Ages?" said Mrs. Frisby. "Can't someone else do it?"

"I'd be glad to do it myself," said Justin, "but I'm too big."

"You see," Nicodemus explained, "Mrs. Fitzgibbon feeds the cat in the morning and in the evening, and his bowl is always kept in the same place—next to a cabinet in one corner of the kitchen. There's a very shallow space between the floor and the bottom of the cabinet. A few years ago when we conceived the idea of putting Dragon to sleep, we cut a hole in the floor just behind the cabinet—if we put it anywhere else they'd see it. To reach the bowl, Mr. Ages crawls under the cabinet. When he gets to the edge, he makes a quick dash to the bowl, drops in the powder, and dashes back out of sight. But with a broken leg, he can't dash."

"We might try leaving some bait outside the house," said Justin. "That worked once."

"Once out of a dozen tries," said Nicodemus. "It isn't dependable, and we don't have much time. To be safe, we ought to move that block tonight."

"If we had some catfood . . ." said Justin, thinking aloud. "He might eat that, even on the porch, because he knows it's his. Maybe tonight I could go in through the attic and down to the kitchen . . ."

"No use," said Mr. Ages. "They keep it in a metal cabinet up on the wall. You couldn't get it without a crew. And that would make too much noise."

"Anyway," said Nicodemus, "it would put off moving the block until tomorrow night."

"Then," Justin said, "I guess what we do is stake out scouts wherever we can, try to keep track of Dragon, and hope for the best. Some nights he doesn't go near the garden at all. We might be lucky."

"Or we might not," said Arthur. "I don't like it. We can't dig that block out without some noise, you know."

Mrs. Frisby interrupted quietly. "There is another way," she said. "If Mr. Ages can get into the kitchen, so can I. If you will give me the powder and show me the way, I will try to put it in Dragon's bowl."

Justin said quickly: "No. It's no job for a lady."

"You forget," Mrs. Frisby said, "I'm Timothy's mother. If you, and Arthur, and others in your group can take risks to save him, surely I can, too. And consider this: I don't want any of you to be hurt—maybe even killed—by Dragon. But even more, I don't want the attempt to fail. Perhaps the worst that will happen to you, with luck, is that you will have to scatter and run, and leave my house unmoved. But then what will happen to us? Timothy, at least, will die. So if there is no one else to put the cat to sleep, I must do it."

Nicodemus considered, and then spoke:

"She's right, of course. If she chooses to take the risk, we can't deny her the right." To Mrs. Frisby he added: "But you should know that the danger is great. It was in the same kitchen, yesterday, running from Dragon's bowl, that Mr. Ages got his leg broken. And it was in doing the same thing, last year, that your husband died."

The Marketplace

Mrs. Frisby's head was buried in her arms. "I never knew," she said. "All I knew was that he didn't come back. But I never knew what happened. I didn't even know he knew you. Why didn't he ever tell me?"

Justin touched her shoulder gently. "It's hard for you to learn it this way, so suddenly," he said. "We thought about telling you when it happened, but we decided we shouldn't. It wouldn't have done any good."

"You ask why Jonathan never told you about us," Nicodemus added. "He had a reason, a good one. Still he worried about it a lot, and he might have told you in the end. But then it was too late."

"What was the reason?" Mrs. Frisby raised her face. There were tears on her cheeks, but she had stopped crying.

"To answer that I would have to tell you quite a long story—the whole story about us, and Nimh, and Jonathan, and how we came here. He came with us, you see. I don't mind doing that, but I don't know if there is time now."

"I think there is," said Justin, "if Mr. Ages and I go to get the powder while you're telling it."

"With this leg," said Mr. Ages glumly, "that will take long enough to tell it twice."

"I had forgotten," said Justin contritely. "Would it be better if I went alone?"

"No," said Mr. Ages. "There are so many different powders in my storeroom. You wouldn't know which to bring back. I'll go with you. But we'll go slowly."

"And I," said Arthur, "will see about the equipment for tonight. We'll need shovels, crowbars, block and tackle, rollers . . ." He left, still listing tools.

Nicodemus said to Mrs. Frisby, "I think that we, too, should leave the library. There will be others coming in, like Isabella, to practice reading, and some to do research."

"Research?"

"We've got some new books on agriculture—farming, gardening, fertilizing, things like that—and we're studying them. It's part of the Plan."

"I don't know what the Plan is."

"No," agreed Nicodemus, "but when I've told you our story, you'll understand that, too."

He opened the door and led Mrs. Frisby down the



corridor past several more doors, all closed. He stopped before one, which he opened.

"My office," he said. "Please come in."

The room she entered was smaller than the library, but much more comfortably—almost elegantly—furnished. There was a rug on the floor (the same pattern, she noticed, as the carpet in the hallway above), a light recessed in the ceiling and another in the wall next to a table. There were bookshelves; on one shelf an electric clock hummed quietly to itself. A book lay open on the table, with a chair in front of it; against the opposite wall stood a small sofa, neatly upholstered in cloth. But what attracted Mrs. Frisby's attention most was a box in one corner of the room, a box with dials and a

small light shining on the front; from this box came the soft sound of music. She listened entranced.

"You like music?" said Nicodemus. "So do I."

"That must be a radio." Again, something vaguely remembered from what Jonathan had once told her. Music. She had heard it only two or three times in her life, when the Fitzgibbons had left a window open and someone was playing inside. And never up close. It was a lovely sound.

"Yes," said Nicodemus. "We didn't get it for music, of course, but to hear the news. Still as long as it's here—why not use it?"

He sat down, and so did Mrs. Frisby.

"Now," he said, "I will tell you about Nimh. You'll be interested, I think, because your husband was part of it. And when I'm finished, I think you will see why he felt he could not tell you himself."

The story begins (Nicodemus continued) not at Nimh, but at a marketplace on the edge of a big city. It was called the Farmers' Market, a great square of a place with a roof over part of it and no walls to speak of. There early every morning the farmers arrived from all over the surrounding countryside, with trucks full of tomatoes, corn, cabbages, potatoes, eggs, chickens, hams, food for the city. One part of it was reserved for the fishermen who brought crabs and oysters and bass and flounders. It was a fine place, noisy and full of smells.

We lived near this market—my father, my mother, my nine sisters and brothers and I—underground in a big pipe that had once been part of a storm sewer, but was no longer used. There were hundreds of other rats

in the neighborhood. It was a rough life, but not so hard as you might think, because of the market.

Every evening at five o'clock the farmers and the fishermen would close up their stalls, pack their trucks, and go home. At night, hours later, the cleanup men would arrive with brooms and hoses. But in between, the market was ours. The food the farmers left behind! Peas and beans that fell from the trucks, tomatoes and squashes, pieces of meat and fish trimmed as waste—they lay on the sidewalks and in the gutters; they filled great cans that were supposed to be covered but seldom were. There was always ten times more than we could eat, and so there was never any need for fighting over it.

Fighting? Quite the contrary, the marketplace was a perfect place for playing, and so we did, the young rats at least, as soon as we had finished eating. There were empty boxes for hide-and-seek, there were walls to climb, tin cans to roll, and pieces of twine to tie and swing on. There was even, in the middle of the square, a fountain to swim in when the weather was hot. Then, at the first clang of the cleanup men in the distance, one of the older rats would sound a warning, and everyone would pick up as much food as he could to carry home. All of us kept a reserve supply, because some days—Sundays and holidays—the market would be closed, and we were never quite sure when this would happen.

When I went to the market, it was usually with two companions, my older brother Gerald and a friend of ours named Jenner. These were my two closest friends; we liked the same games, the same jokes, the same topics of conversation—even the same kinds of food. I particularly admired Jenner, who was extremely quick and

intelligent.

One evening in early fall Jenner and I set out for the marketplace. It must have been September, for the leaves were just turning yellow and some children were throwing a football in a vacant lot. Gerald had to stay home that night; he had caught a cold, and since the air was chilly, my mother thought he should not go out. So Jenner and I went without him. I remember we promised to bring him back some of his favorite food, beef liver, if we could find any.

We took our usual route to the market, not along the streets but through the narrow walkways between the buildings, mostly commercial warehouses and garages, that bordered the square. As we walked, we were joined by more rats; at that time of day they converged on the marketplace from all directions. When we reached the square, I noticed that there was a white truck of an odd, square shape parked on the street bordering it, perhaps a block away. I say I noticed it—I did not pay any particular attention to it, for trucks were common enough in that part of town; but if I had, I would have noticed that printed on each side of it were four small letters: NIMH. I would not have known what they were, of course, for at that time neither I nor any of the other rats knew how to read.

It was growing dark when we reached the market, but through the dusk we could see that there was an unusually large supply of food—a great mound of it—near the center of the square, away from the roofed-over portion. I suppose that should have served as a warning, but it didn't. I remember Jenner's saying, "They must have had a really busy day," and we ran

joyfully toward the pile along with several dozen other rats.

Just as we reached the food it happened. All around us suddenly there was shouting. Bright, blinding search-lights flashed on, aimed at us and at the mound of food, so that when we tried to run away from it, we could not see where we were going. Between and behind the lights there were shadows moving swiftly, and as they came toward us I could see that they were men—men in white uniforms carrying nets, round nets with long handles.

“Look out!” cried Jenner. “They’re trying to catch us.” He darted in one direction, I in another, and I lost sight of him.

We all ran—straight toward the men with the nets. There was no other way to run; they had us encircled. The nets flailed down, scooped, flailed again. I suppose some rats made it through, slipping between the men and past the lights. I felt a swish—a net just missed me. I turned and ran back toward the mound, thinking I might hide myself in it. But then came another swish, and that time I felt the enveloping fibers fall over me. They entangled my legs, then my neck. I was lifted from the ground along with three other rats, and the net closed around us.