

Fade Away

By Lauren Gonzalez

The sun is where it is supposed to be, low in the sky and floating across the rooftops to the south. The trees are bare, their leaves having left their youthful greens to settle into their elder yellows, oranges and reds before surrendering their dried carcasses to gravity. It is the season when the wind whistles and roars, when the thin windowpanes snap under the rays of midday sunlight answering to the chilly air on the other side of the glass.

The air outside is cool but this is only the beginning for the Northeast. Soon comes the season when ice coats the panes so proficiently that the old professor will curse as he works to jostle the window open to free the hostage smoke set forth from his mahogany pipe. And we'll all be better for it, Anaximenes, an ancient Greek who understood the value of air, might have said. Amid the balmy expulsions of an overtaxed radiator and continuous billows of pipe smoke, the old professor will fight the window that hasn't seen a paint job since its birth until it gives way to a meek inch or two of sharp, gray and invigorating outdoors that siphons our tobacconist's rainforest in one steady gust into the New York City atmosphere. Beyond dismissing just enough fusty air to make the room bearable, the professor's apartment takes in little of the outside during these window-to-world exchanges, an act of discriminate physics if you ask me. But what do I know about physics? I'm just a rat.

We rats have lived in this building a long time but the old professor doesn't know any of us nor does he care that we're here. He's not one of those fussy extermination types and wouldn't likely scream if he saw me. Instead, he'd dismiss me with a weak wave from a spotty brown hand and mumble something about Günter Grass having been right about rats all along.

He lives alone, and in his 93 years has occupied no more than four homes, this one for at least fifty as far as I can count, which some rats aren't known to do.

The professor's ritual is the same each day with one exception—once a week he ventures outdoors for tea, tobacco, matches, cheese, eggs, bananas, and sometimes a crumbly baguette or light bulb, but never a newspaper. On the other mornings, the professor moves from his bed to his teakettle on the stove to his chair by the window, that very window with which he battles each season, every day, twice a day. He struggles to pry it open and later in the day repeats the act to push it closed. He opens the window by inching the right side, the left, then back to the right until the entire contraption rumbles upward to his great satisfaction. With the adversarial window open he stands victorious, his hands proudly grasping his bony flannel-swaddled hips (the silhouette of a much younger, sturdier man almost visible in his stance) and takes in a minor lungful of the outdoors until his emphysema takes hold, launching him gut-first clenching into a fit of coughing.

He scowls and releases what little weight he carries onto the antique straight-back chair that has resided in this apartment as long as he, or so I've been told. As for me, I don't much care for things, so tend not to keep track of them. Once settled, the professor crosses his right pajama leg, slippered foot and all, over his knob of a left knee and begins to pack his pipe. Never once does he reach for a lamp or a light switch, not before evening, not even on the darkest day. But he does reach for that foil envelope of tobacco. Oh, how he reaches for it. He trembles as he unfurls the wax-coated paper that shields the layer of foil promising, "freshness guaranteed." His wrinkly, anxious fingertips rustle through the tobacco with a life all their own until he pulls out a generous plug and works it mindfully into the bowl of the pipe. The professor packs his tobacco firmly, but not too dense, because, as any creature knows, a good smoke needs to breathe.

There is never a finer moment each day than when the old professor, satisfied with the quality of his pack, strikes a wooden match against his jujube tree matchbox from sub-Saharan Africa and holds the flame next to the eager tobacco, the pipe to his eager lips. I watch him day after day take that first pull on the pipe and then rest his head against the back of the chair, smoke teasing the air like a slow-motion harem dancer with only the most ambitious of the swirling vapors slipping quickly through the window to unite with the outdoor world's mélange of smells. How he treasures his first pipe of the day and turns melancholy immediately after because the second pipe, he knows, will be less satisfying, and the third and sometimes fourth even less again. By the time he turns on his evening lamp for reading, from the same chair by the window, he begins a ritual of clock watching, a yearning for bedtime, it seems, so that he might wake and start the pleasurable ceremony—the only in his life—anew.

But first he has to close the window.

When the sun disappears behind the buildings to the west, the old professor takes his cue and stands from his chair like a skeleton rising in spite of its skin and presses what can still be called the meaty part of his hands against the bottom of the window frame. He inches it downward, left side, then a smack to the right, then a whack to the left until the beast shudders into its final resting spot for the night. He then shuffles to the kitchen for a fresh cup of hot tea and—my favorite—a cheese plate. With snack in hand, plate askew from his feeble grip, he treads back to the chair where unbeknownst to him he tantalizes me with disregarded crumbs of Roquefort or Cheshire that avalanche from his fingers and lips. I wait for him to retreat to bed before I filch the crumbs, because, I am well aware, he will stay up to read at least two chapters

of a book, any book, whose pages are so yellowed they might crumble to the floor and join the cheese. I don't know a lot about the lives of humans beyond the examples set forth by the professor, but I have learned a few things from the professor's books, which he reads aloud, perhaps for the companionship of his own voice. When the clock strikes eleven, he closes his book, unfurls the pretzel he has made of his legs, stands from his chair, checks the window lock, and takes his teacup and plate to the kitchen before retiring to bed.

But not today, because today he stopped moving shortly after he closed the window.

I watch him from my space in the wall near the lamp base and curtain cuff. My front door is raised nearly an inch off the hardwood floor thanks to generations of my kind diligently chewing the baseboard to create a safe passage to the exterior walls of the building. Here I sit, in vigil with the professor. My greatest disappointment on this day is my missed meal. To recap – the sun had set and the old professor turned on the lamp and tackled the particularly stubborn window to a close. He sat back in his chair. He didn't go for his second cup of tea and his cheese plate. There was no Camus or Dostoyevsky or Mann tonight, only the old professor's frightened eyes, and then his head, drooping, drooping, drooping until his chin rested on his chest and he stopped moving altogether. I wait for evidence of life, the late night rattle of phlegm in his lungs, but nothing. The only sound I hear is a broadcast of hunger from my belly.

In the morning, the sun shines through the window right on schedule. I look toward the professor, still there in his chair unmoving. His pipe waits on the side table, his packet of tobacco plump with anticipation. His matches, expectant. His chin is still at rest against his sternum, although his skin has changed to a gray, sullen color that matches a cheese he eats with vigor, but

only during the hot season. The apartment is lively with stench. My stomach trembles again as I watch the old professor, then the window, and again the professor, wondering when he will rise to open the window and resume our schedule. After all, I need to eat.

He never rises nor opens the window. The ice eventually comes and the window stays shut, not just because of the ice but because the old professor hasn't moved to wrestle it open. I manage to venture out through the walls to find something to eat but remain vigilant on the professor in hopes of returning to a nice South of France Roquefort, a Stilton, a Bleu d'Auvergne—favorites for the professor and me. They have mold! I daydream of those but I subsist on building materials, paper and trash in their absence. By the late part of the ice season, the lamp turns itself off and goes to sleep. I sleep along with it, waking only to forage.

Months pass and the old professor looks different—hard, darkened by age, statue-like if one might construct a figurine of a gnarled man. If he would stand, he would surely look like an old tree, knotted and leafless. But he does not, and it's now the season when birds tap on the glass and the professor throws the window open easily, or at least more easily than he does when it's sealed in ice. He smokes heartily when the birds come, and the birds stop coming because the smoke flows evenly out the fully exposed window all day, and who can blame them? Who would want to fly through that? But the professor remains in his chair, the pouch of tobacco at his side, and no one, not even a bird, comes to the closed window or the old man's door.

And so the story goes. Month after month, humans say, although it is one continuous moment to me. I grow older, I suppose, and lose my reliance upon the old man for food. I am no longer attached. It is probably for the best, as I'd become heavier than a rat should be to navigate the small spaces we need to get into and out of quickly if we intend on staying alive, spaces, humans should know, that are much smaller than you might assume. I don't know exactly how

much time has passed in your human terms, but the ice has come three separate seasons since the professor stopped moving. My old friend is now skinny and meatless and his smell, although it had never bothered me, has faded along with the scent of his smoke. I am more adventurous now, wandering around the apartment during the day finding books, shoes, and woolen sweaters, which to eat. I fear the professor might wake to discover that I've devoured his wingtips. He hasn't worn them in years and so the statute of limitations on ownership versus gluttony seems to tilt in my favor on this occasion. I do miss the cheese but I've learned instead to appreciate houseplants. Now they are gone, too, presumably because I ate them.

The days pass slowly without the professor's routine but one day someone slips an envelope under the door. Naturally, I taste it. The paper is bland but I like the glue strip, which I nibble at for a week. An uncountable number of sunsets later bring a knock on the same door. A short ham of a man with a shiny, hairless head enters the apartment and lifts what remains of the envelope from the floor and drops it just as quickly. "Damn rodents! Damn you, Max!" He shakes his head and looks around the apartment with his hands authoritatively on his hips, much like the professor after winning a war with the window. Humans are proud of themselves for such simple acts. Rats do not have such pride. We simply don't need it.

"Max?" he calls out. I sit in stillness under the baseboard, peeking out my door. I've seen this round man before. He is responsible for the deaths of countless of my family in other parts of the building. But I forgive him. He doesn't know what else to do. If I were him and he were me would I do the same? Would I destroy all rats, take away their homes to ensure extra space for the humans? I should hope not, but it does not help me or my kind to hate him for his ignorance. He is a cheese-bearer, too, like the professor. Unlike the professor, though, this man never samples the cheese first to show us that it's safe. A smart rodent knows that any food that

bypasses the mouth of a human is fodder for the trap. The round man leaves and returns with another man, who walks up to the professor and covers his own mouth and nose with his hand.

“Oh, my Lord.” The other man says through his fingers, “How long has he been like *this?*”

The round man who has taken most of my family shakes his head and covers his mouth, too. Neither takes his eyes from the professor and I feel self-conscious for my old friend because he isn't at his best.

“He was a pensioner. Retired professor,” the round man says. “Had those automatic payments set up for years, that computer thing they do these days. His pension goes into his bank account at the beginning of the month, and two days later, his bank sends a check to me. How was I to know? The payments kept coming in, so what did I care?”

The other man shakes his head but leaves his hand over his mouth, maybe out of shock, because there's nothing left of the professor to smell. I stopped smelling him weeks ago, and my nose is far better than a human's.

“I slipped a letter under the door about the rent going up, first time in five years. Never heard back, though. I got the same six-eighty and twenty-two cents he's been paying for years for five months. So I came up here to see what was going on. Had to unlock the door myself. Lo' and behold, here we are with this!”

In the days following the round man's visit to the old professor, men in groups tear the professor's home apart, but only after two men in white removed the old professor in a vinyl cocoon that reminded me of a plump larvae I'd once had the opportunity to eat, and secretly wished to eat again. Two different men came and carried out the professor's chair wrapped in

something, too, like prey swaddled again and again in a spider's web. The same ones now take the side table, the curtains, the lamp, the bed, the teakettle, the dishes, the pipe, the matches, the tobacco, the matchbox from Africa, the clock, the photos, the clothes, the books and eventually the window itself. A wheezing pale man with big arms cuts around its edges with an angry saw and removes the entire thing with the ease of slicing a spot of mold from a brick of cheese. With a man-sized hole in the wall exposing the professor's apartment to the outdoors, a full exchange of air happens. A curious starling lands on a craggy edge of wall once occupied by the nemesis window. The bird looks in with her head tilted sideways and flies away.

I flee, too, once the men begin to pry the old baseboards from the wall. I check back every so often, mostly at night, until fresh paint covers the walls and new baseboards block access to the apartment. If I want back in I will have to risk being heard while gnawing another doorway. I hear things on the other side of the wall in the professor's apartment, even if I can't see them. I hear clacking against a new wood floor. Women laughing. Cheery voices, life in that motion humans so seem to desire behind the sealed wall but only for an hour or two each day, always following long periods of silence interrupted by an unlocking door before another explosion of noise bursts forth and fills the empty space. Eventually furniture comes, music plays, the scent of hot food seeps through the walls. Laughter again. Coffee beans grinding, a machine of some sort beckons its people to dinner with a series of beeps. Beep-beep-beep. Click. And then the clatter of bowls, plates, and silverware. Television, alarm clocks. *You've got mail*, exclaims a spirited man whose voice never seems to change. A baby wails in want for something and a woman coos in muffled response. Phones create a symphony of unique sounds that stir this family into confusion and action. *Is it yours? No, it's dad's. Did he get it? It's just a text. Tell him to get it anyway. Why? You tell him.* Just make it stop buzzing. The cacophony of noise

cascades along the baseline of a constantly bleating box I've been told by friends in the next building is a television—man's best and worst friend. The family doesn't seem to talk to this box, but it always talks to them. What kind of a friendship is that? Perhaps one like that of the elderly human relative downstairs who is tolerated as he knocks about the house but largely ignored, acknowledged more in his absence than for his presence.

I will live out the rest of my days in the wall but I miss the old professor. These people will leave one day, and maybe I'll be around to see their exit, too. I've heard it all before. They'll grow tired of the pace and move to a place called Connecticut for a yard and access to a better school district, whatever that means. I hear the adults speak in low voices late at night about crime and the *dangers of raising children in the city*. The woman cries as she speaks pleading words, and the man grumbles defensively. They argue about waiting lists, fees and some fellow named Montessori who must be a guru or a god by whose good graces their children must be delivered or else the woman of this human pairing will *just die*. And so when they meet this Montessori, when their children are collected in his bountiful arms and whisked off to the magical, not to mention *safe* place of higher learning that they imagine, they, too, will leave. The men will return to take away the furniture, the TV, the microwave who makes their dinner, the man who tells them about their mail, the coffeepot, the chairs, the lamps and maybe even the new window, replacing it with yet another model, one even better suited for shutting out the world, because the world, to them, only amounts to what is happening inside their four walls. The silence will return for a while but then so will come the painters, the real estate agents and the next round of televisions, high heels, phones, alarm clocks, babies and maybe this time a four-legged companion animal that will smell me lurking behind the walls (but everyone will be too busy to notice; I've seen it before). The round man said that the professor lived alone and I

thought that to be accurate, but the truth is, I am the only one truly home, because the humans they just come and go.