

## War

Rain sweeps upriver in slow moving columns like a May Day parade through Red Square. New leaves, bright green, on willowy boughs bend as the indomitable columns pass through tree crowns and fields of clover and continue pressing inland. In the cemetery at Klammath Grade, lilac blossoms turn their shoulders to the rain and hang heavy over veterans who fought in foreign wars. And the forester for Guy Roberts Lumber Company, head bowed and wet, having run out of gas a mile upriver, hurries towards Siletz. His steps are doubletime.

When I see the forester, I stop and offer him a ride: I need a place to live, and the lumber company owns several older houses. But the heavy mudtread of my Bronco's tires sing so loudly as they sling rain from the wet pavement that conversation is difficult. What he hears is different from what I ask. Nevertheless, he says, "You could probably get Hank Kenatta's old place there at Twin Bridges for forty-five a month," as if he had read my thoughts.

Hank had died a year or so earlier. The lumber company bought his place to gain access to several million boardfeet of timber they owned that they would otherwise have to pay for trespass rights through Georgia-Pacific's holdings in addition to the expense of building the haulroad. They paid less for Hank's farm than they would've paid for trespass.

Most of Hank's hundred forty acres are in brush-choked fields that alders are reclaiming. But his place also includes an old sawmill site. Several of the outbuildings still stand.

Hank had been living in the four bedroom manager's house. The other three houses on the site, though, are uninhabitable and serve only as frameworks for blackberry tangles. Even the road around the millpond that leads uphill, at one time planked with old-growth fir instead of being graveled (planking was cheaper than rock), is overgrown by sapling alders, scotch broom and blackberries.

After returning the forester to his pickup with a couple of gallons of gas, I hurry to the lumber company's office at their Toledo sawmill where I ask to rent the Kenatta place ... I move in the next day.

Any dwelling along the Coast not occupied by humans is usually claimed by wood rats. Hank's house is no exception. A large pack rat has taken up residency on top of the pantry shelves in the utility room. Her nest, several feet across, stinks of her urine. It has to go; she has to go.

My experience with rats is limited: I trapped a couple of rats under the old Adventist church we remodeled while I was in high school. They were the generic urban variety that a common rat trap will catch and kill. They were a little bigger and a little smarter than a mouse, but trapping them had been merely a matter of smearing peanut butter on the trigger of what looked like an oversize mouse trap.

But the critter that dwells in the utility room of Hank's house is the size of a small cat, and her white forefeet look more like my hands than feet of a rat.

In my travels, I had acquired a Victor #1½ single spring leg-hold trap. I suspect this trap might be a bit large for the rat, but my wife has already set up her washing machine in the utility room, and she wants the rat gone before she

does her first load of laundry. She informs me that I'm not to play fair with the rat, that I am to kill it, and the sooner the better. So using an empty freezer basket—I have also moved our chest freezer into the utility room—I construct a cubby set, with some scorched mincemeat for bait, the mincemeat having conveniently thawed during our move.

The rat doesn't seem to like the mincemeat any better than I do. She doesn't come near the set.

After a week, I break the set apart, return the basket to the freezer, and tell my wife, "It looks like the rat has left."

Retreated would have been the better word.

Before another week passes, I am awakened at 3:37 a.m. by the gnawing of the rat on the insulation of wiring in the utility room. I know exactly when I am awakened for I knock the alarm clock off the nightstand when I jump out of bed.

The rat is gone by the time I turn on the utility room's overhead light.

The head of our bed is against the wall separating our bedroom from the utility room; so when the rat returns the following night and awakens my wife, she insists that I get up and kill it despite me having just gotten to sleep from getting home at midnight. Although I don't seem to need much sleep and I don't get much, I don't like being awakened when I am asleep. The rat does, indeed, have to go. And set the #1½ trap in the middle of rat's nest before going back to bed—her nest now seems to get rebuilt each night regardless of what I set on top of the pantry shelves.

I no sooner lie down than I hear the trap snap.

As I hurriedly get back up I expect to hear a struggle, but I don't. I don't hear anything. And there is nothing in the trap but a stick.

I have had smart coyotes dig out traps and piss on them, telling me in their way what they think of my efforts. I have had raccoons spring traps by pushing a wad of debris into them. But I trip traps with a stick. Critters don't. I am not used to having an animal deliberately spring a trap with a stick.

The rat now returns every night, and her nightly gnawing on insulation begins a war I am determined to win without resorting to poison, not that I think poison will work. I certainly don't want poisoned grain around: the chickens would, inevitably, find it.

Weeks become months, and the rat grows smarter as I grow more determined to kill her. After the house gets quiet at night, she begins her gnawing, but if I turn on a light anywhere in the house she is gone. If she hears my feet hit the bedroom floor, she is gone. And she never again comes near a trap.

My wife learns to live with the rat although I still hear about my failure to kill it when she sees its footprints on the utility room floor ... her washing machine leaks and anything that walks through the puddle of water in front of it leaves wet footprints on the utility room floor. When the bear came into the utility room, woofed at the cats, and frightened my wife while I was gone, its wet footprints were still visible when I came home a couple of hours later and gave proof to what my wife said about the bear—I trapped the old boar the following day. I hung some elk ribs in a tree, and cut a ten foot long viney maple for a drag; I had two #15 traps. The old boar was hungry and easy to catch and kill. But this pack or wood rat is anything but easy to kill.

One of the boiler firemen at the pulpmill found that he could take a small-headed three cell flashlight and lengthen its body with a piece of chrome plated drainpipe from under a kitchen sink and thereby make a small-headed seven cell flashlight (this is in the days before *MagLites*). All of those working in the mill needed a small-headed seven cell which no one could otherwise buy: a fellow can hold a small-headed flashlight in the same hand he holds the forearm of his rifle and still keep its beam parallel to his line of sight. He can shoot if he needs to with the aid of the flashlight without any brackets attaching the light to his rifle barrel.

I have one of these seven cells, and use it every so often to dispatch a raccoon or possum that gets into my garbage or my garden. I keep mine by my gunrack for when I need it.

During these years of my early married life, I sleep nude, a fact that will come into play shortly.

I also continually drink coffee while working without its caffeine having any apparent effect, but on this one day, someone brings me in a large sack of chocolate covered coffee beans. I think they are pretty good, and I eat a couple of handfuls before going to bed. For the first time ever, I feel wired. I know, now, what other fellows talk about when they claim that caffeine keeps them awake. I'm not a bit sleepy when Johnny Carson signs off, but I have to get up in the morning so I head for bed where I lie in the darkened house, wide awake, staring at the ceiling, wishing I hadn't eaten those coffee beans and wondering why they effected me when coffee never has before. I tell myself that I'll avoid chocolate covered coffee beans in the future, and I wonder who thought up the combination. The person who did either was extremely tolerant of caffeine, or the person liked feeling wired.

About two a.m., still wide awake, I hear the rat.

Quietly and slowly, as quietly and slowly as if I had a big buck coming into a stand, I rise from bed and without turning on a light, I slip my hunting pouch over my shoulder and load my .54 with ten grains of powder. Capping my rifle and taking the seven-cell from the gunrack, I sneak into the kitchen and open the door into the utility room. And more slowly than the moon was setting, I climb atop the chest freezer, aim at where the rat's nest is, and slip on the seven cell.

The spot of bright, bright light freezes the rat long enough for me to fire ...

Ten grains isn't much powder. Fired outside during the day, its report is hardly louder than popping just the cap. But at night in a quiet house, my shot seems to roar from the utility room, through the kitchen and living room and into the bedroom where a frightened wife leaps from bed and rushes to see what happened, turning on every light on her way.

She stands in the doorway between the kitchen and utility room and starts to laugh—she laughs so hard she dribbles on the floor as she finds me standing atop the freezer, wearing just my hunting pouch, blowing down the muzzle of my .54.

And if I don't tell this story, she will.

The rat is dead, my ball having removed its head.

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