

Two Stories

Contributed by Laurie Stone

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Garmentos"Zev fucked everybody," Ellen says. Our parents are dead, and my sister is the keeper of the family lore, the juicier the better. We like being Jews who lack propriety, the kind you would want to ban from your society. You want a Jew to back away from? We'll be your Jews. So when Ellen evokes Zev's exploits, we feel a sense of family pride.

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Uncle Zev had a gleaming smile and wavy black hair, and when I was a little girl, a little temptress, he said, "You will drive boys wild." He was the Bill Clinton of furriers, an equal opportunity womanizer.

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"Zev fucked Bell," Ellen says. She means our mother's younger sister. My sister and I are in Starbucks, and Ellen leans close. Aunt Bell was tan and wiry, thinner than our mother. In the Long Beach years, Toby packed on a little padding, but never Bell. She was a stringy, tendony thing you'd have to pull from your teeth if you ate her. Her mouth must have watered when Zev flashed his Clark Gable smile.

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Zev was married to Kate, a stunning redhead in the style of Rita Hayworth with skin as soft as a moth's wing. Her people were civilized, and maybe by marrying her Zev was trying to mute his howl--like Jack Kennedy with Jackie Bouvier.

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According to Ellen, our father's brother meets our mother's sister at a wedding both families attend, and during the festivities Zev and Bell arrange to meet at a hotel. Zev is rich. He wears handmade suits and lives in a twelve-room apartment on Park Avenue. Kate works in the showroom with him, but he says he is lunching with a buyer. Bell drives down from Westchester and sits on Zev's lap as he eases the knots in her tight little muscles. They don't know why they are unhappy. Are they unhappy or just alive?

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Zev makes things better and worse for Bell. She wants more than the hour he can steal away for their rendezvous, but she treasures the feeling of being used up in these afternoons, a woman with a secret life, a woman on the verge of having no life at all. Her husband, Eli, doesn't speak. No one remembers a word out of his mouth. Her daughter, Brenda, skulks around with angry circles under her eyes. And the image of her boy, Sam, disappears like invisible ink when he leaves a room. Sam takes after his father, while Brenda, like her mother, is a fire with nothing to burn. After Zev and Bell have finished in bed, Bell showers. Zev kisses her and tells her to spend as much time as she likes in the room. People pay so much for his furs he can live forever on the profits, except he's a gambler, and he dies young of a heart attack.

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"What heart attack?" my father says. "It was a mob hit made to look like a heart attack. He owed money. They have drugs." My father's lips tremble at the loss of his dashing brother. My father, the middle son of five, looks to catch things as they fall.

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In my favorite memory of Zev, he strides along the boardwalk in Long Beach, looking like a movie star in his thousand dollar, camel's hair coat. Irving, another of my father's brothers, has settled here along with my grandfather, who lives in a beach front hotel with his third wife, Elsie. My grandfather faces the pounding surf, wearing the still, satisfied expression of a chimp with a cigar. My father and Zev foot the bills for their tata, the former pants presser--it was specialized work, my father explains. When Zev is with us, we bounce along in a Fellini parade. He makes the air smell like the Mediterranean.

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In my sister's memory of our uncle, she is nineteen and recuperating from an abortion at the apartment of Zev and Kate. My parents are in the dark. The abortion has been paid for by Andr , the shrink who treats Zev and Kate, their two daughters, Ellen, my mother, and me. While Ellen is sleeping, she feels a body moving beside her in the bed. Zev has slid under the covers and is pushing his cock against her behind. She is bloody and tired, but she tells him to go away. He slinks off and lies to Andre about what happened. In the Starbucks, when Ellen tells the story of Zev, she is laughing. She is sixty-six with diamonds on both hands, and our uncle has been wearing cement galoshes for thirty years.Å

Rat RashamonIn a magazine interview, the German writer WG Sebald described a rat experiment, meant to illustrate hope. A rat was placed in a cylinder of water. It swam around for a minute, realized it couldn't get out, and died of cardiac arrest. A second rat was placed in a similar cylinder, only this one had a ladder, and it climbed out. The same rat was then placed in a cylinder without any means of escape, and it kept swimming until it died of exhaustion. Sebald said to the interviewer, "You're given something--a holiday to Tenerife or you meet a nice person--and so you carry on, even though it's quite hopeless." He chuckled enigmatically.

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Richard and I were having coffee in Starbucks. I read the bit about the rat experiments, and he sat up straight and said, "Even if you discover something about hope from these experiments, you have to ask yourself, 'What did the scientist get out of causing a ratty heart attack in the first animal and sending both rats to the choir eternal?' No one interested in hope would place a defenseless creature in a hopeless situation. To be interested in hope is to care about when it succeeds. If you are organizing its failure, you are interested in seeing suffering."

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I wondered what kind of experiment could produce the conditions for hope. Maybe a late-in-life romance with someone

who could identify with a rat. His eyes were heavy-lidded and looked Chinese. I doubted he would have defended wild rats, though, for if the tameable, white lab rat is an analogue for the human body, the urban brown rat may be an analogue for our fierce natures--especially the natures of scientists designing rat experiments.

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In Joseph Mitchell's famous essay, written in 1944, he chronicles the rats of New York, portraying an animal that has been nearly as successful as human beings at dominating the planet--and without human technology. Mitchell's rat is a force with more venom than purpose for it, an animal whose overkill flourish embodies a Rabelasian dimension. Brown rats can destroy the contents of a market on a stupor-inducing tear. They can gnaw through steel, bore a hole in almost any material and squirm through spaces half their size. Harbor rats can run up a pole wielded at them and attack a person's hands and face. They like to bite babies because babies smell of food.

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Despite such savagery, when I am away from my city, I feel homesick for my street-rat existence in the days before Richard. I remember waiting in the subway after late-night catering jobs. It's two or three in the morning and the subway musicians have all quit, and there are just a few of us leaning over the platform to spot a distant headlight on a train too far away to hear. Down on the tracks rats are playing in the muddy water and fattening on chicken bones and pizza crusts. They are having the time of their lives, possessed of an ease in the world that surpasses hope.Â Â