



THE DAY THE **RATS** VETOED CONGRESS

A Fable of Citizen Action By
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1 • Invader

IT WAS ONE of those uncomfortable morning strategy sessions with his senior staff. For House Speaker Reginald Blamer, the discomfort was in having to figure ways to continue blocking a long overdue raise in the federal minimum wage for many millions of low-income workers when he knew in his gut that it was not the right thing to do.

“We’re in the crosshairs,” he would say, starting such Congressional meetings in his spacious office.

Not that his anxiety would cause him to renege on the implicit promise he’d made to the Big Boys to stop the move in Congress to raise the minimum. But there was still background anxiety. After all, politicians are only human, and, like many, Speaker Blamer came from a large family that had lived through tightened circumstances. His father was a tavern keeper and his mother a seamstress. Deep anxiety, however, did have one inherent comfort at such morning gatherings; it tended to work in mysterious ways to overcome his morning constipation — the constant bane of The Speaker’s existence. Holding down 30 million American workers — including among them many conservative voters, who are making less today than workers made in 1968, adjusted for inflation — bothered the very private, self-censored psychosomatic recesses of The Speaker’s conscience.

And, so, not surprisingly, Speaker Blamer felt the onset of a solid bowel movement. He excused himself and repaired to his large private bathroom. As he sat down on the broad porcelain toilet, he felt that the expected discharge would be ample and prompt — no straining today. After quick breaks of the wind, The Speaker heard a sound inside the toilet. But it wasn’t from his bowels. Lifting himself up a bit, he looked down and saw the head of a mostly submerged black rat closely eyeing his bottom.

“YEEEOW! YEEEEOW! YEEEOW!” bellowed The Speaker as he straightened up, slammed the cover down, and flushed.

Alarmed, the staff rushed to the bathroom door to respectfully call, “Speaker Blamer, are you all right? Do you need help?”

They dared not open the door. The Speaker did not tolerate any exposure of his privacy, especially being seen in his corpulent native suit.

Another, more normal person might have replied, “Yeah, I’m OK ... it’s just that there was a rat in the toilet bowl.”

But Speaker Blamer was not a normal person. He had had to be super-cunning to get to his present station in life. Being cunning means you can instantly sense danger, being as alert as, say, a rat. And Speaker Blamer was already imagining the derisive headlines and the late-night-show jokes if he disclosed what really prompted his impulsive cries of sheer terror as he leapt from the “throne.” So he replied, “Nothing much, boys, just one of those sudden spasms I get once in a while. Sure comes on fast — and goes away fast, too. I’ll be right out.”

Rejoining the staff at the head of the conference table, albeit full of gas and undischarged waste, The Speaker went through the checklist for crushing the hopes of the downtrodden multitudes. His Chief of Staff reviewed the usual elements of the campaign against workers. First off, The Speaker will say, “I always thought that if you raise the price of anything, you get less of it. The proposal to raise the minimum wage is a Job Killer!”

“Good sound bite,” said his research assistant.

The Speaker nodded gravely, though when he heard the work “bite” he silently winced.

The operations assistant counted off the usual, reliable economics professors who would supply “objective” warning about losses of jobs and recession. The fast-food and big-box retailer associations had begun the large ad buy on television and radio with the announcers’ stentorian voices of dire gravity. The K-Street lobbyists were already in action on Capitol Hill, marshaling the corporate PACS to make sure that this issue was on the front burner, hinting to legislators that their employers might see this as a litmus test as a condition for their donations. Op-eds, letters to the editors, and editorial condemnation of economically disruptive higher wages and layoffs were already in the pipeline.

About to burst, The Speaker could not wait to end the meeting. “OK, fellows, you seem to have the situation well in hand — it’s not the first time we had to fight off this wage grab. Get to work.”

They all scattered, including an irreverent intern who wondered to herself whether paying members of Congress more would mean the government would end up with less of *them*.

The moment the door to his spacious office closed, The Speaker lunged to his private toilet, whereupon he unloaded a vast quantity of feces: soft and semi-hard. Three bursts worth. Before he could enjoy a moment of quiet satisfaction, a shrill shriek lifted him up as his eyes bulged. It was the black rat swimming in the bowl propelling the terrified cry — “YEEEOW! YEEEOW! YEEEOW!”

Again he slammed down the toilet seat. He flushed and kept his hand on the flush handle, gritting his teeth as if to say: “On the way to oblivion, you dirty rat!”

His longtime secretary heard his yell and rushed to his bathroom. “Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, what happened? Are you OK?”

Recovering his composure, he replied, “I’m OK, Sarah, just more of those sudden spasms. I’ve got to get some physical therapy. By the way, did you schedule that fundraiser next week for an hour later?”

“Yes, I did, Mr. Speaker,” Sarah replied, sounding very relieved.



Arriving home early that evening, he sat down to a healthy-diet supper prepared by his adoring wife, Regina. Their three children were grown up, living in distant states, and so they were “empty nesters.”

“You seem unusually agitated, honey,” said Regina. “Did you have a hard day?”

“It seems every day is a hard day in these times,” he replied, shrugging off her concern. “What a great meal, as always, Regina! Now I need some relaxing reading. Do you know where we put that colorful book of animals that we got as a wedding anniversary gift years ago?”

“Why, yes, Reginald. It came in three volumes: mammals, reptiles, and insects. Tell me which one you want, and I will get it for you.”

“Mammals,” he replied.

Sitting in his study, The Speaker started reading about the rat.

The word “rat” is derived from the Latin “*rodere*” which means “to gnaw.” Rats produce litters several times a year, with high infant mortality. If seen as weak, newborns are eaten by their parents and their stronger siblings. Over the centuries, rats have developed uncanny abilities to survive dangers everywhere, especially those produced by their proximity to humans whose detritus and garbage ironically provide the means by which they prosper and create new nests. Rats live everywhere underground — under sewers, in buildings, highways, yards, cellars. They also wander to get food, which may involve killing any mammals smaller than they, including mice. They also eat insects. Their appetite is immense, facilitated by their sharp teeth. This leads some intrepid rats to wander into little known crevices and, yes, pipes. Restaurant kitchens and their refuse attract them since these animals have a strong sense of smell.

Then The Speaker, saw the words, “They even like feces.” The Speaker had enough. But before he closed the book, he saw a footnote citing

conversations that bloggers had with frightened people asking about rats swimming up the toilet bowl. The Speaker went to the sites. He learned that when sewer lines are in disrepair or when storms overpower the sewer system, rats see an opportunity. Most everybody knows that rats can run, climb, and leap up to three feet. Fewer know that rats can gnaw through concrete. Even fewer know what an impossibly tiny space rats can squeeze through when they smell food or prey. And who knows that rats can tread water for three days and can swim over a half mile to reach dry ground?

Flushing is only a temporary fix, for a rat can hold its breath until the water passes. Rats can even gain entry through the soil pipes (the pipes that carry “soiled” water from the toilets), then through the vent in the roof and down the pipe into the toilet. “Rats can always find a way if there is one,” one plumber was quoted as saying.

The Speaker scrolled down to a section titled “Rats and Bubonic Plague, Typhus, and Rabies ...” This time he really had enough and switched off his computer, retiring to his chambers, somewhat nauseous.

2 • Repeat Performance

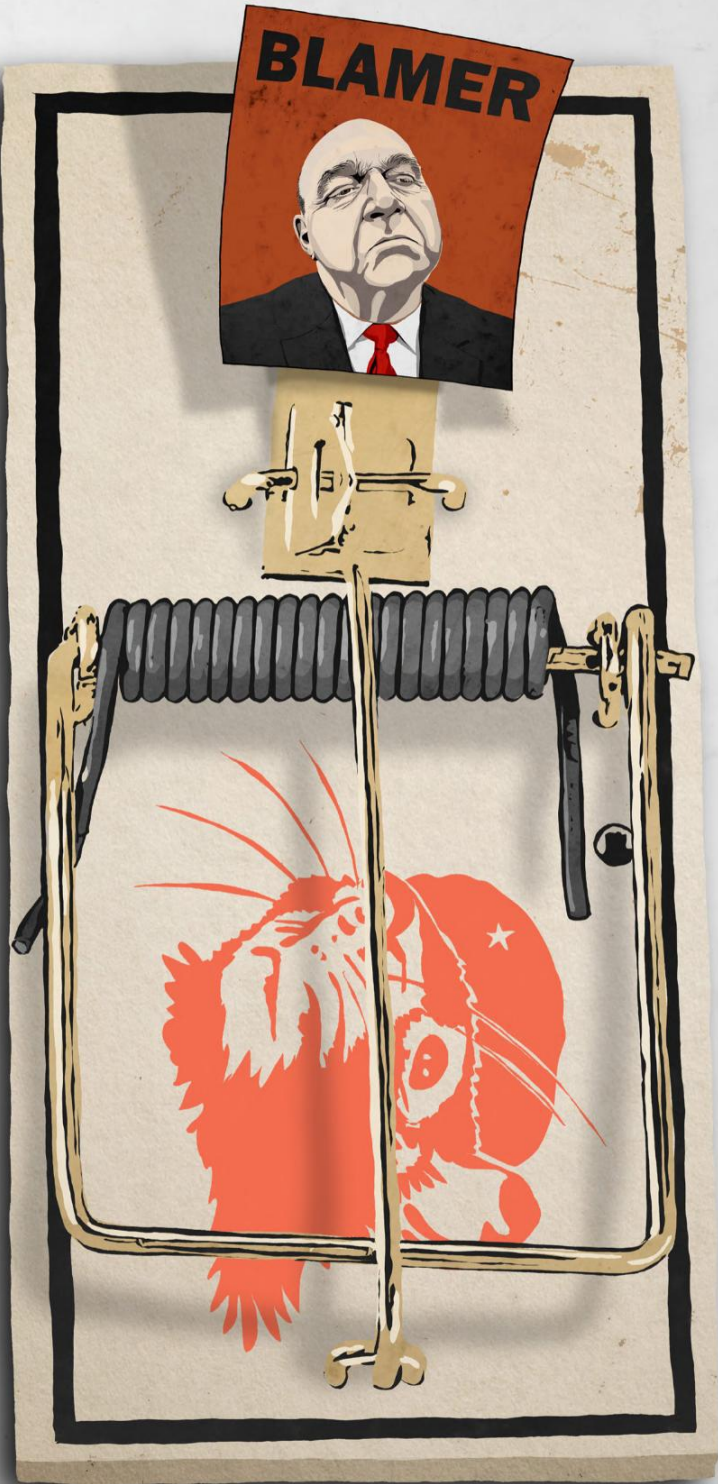
THE NEXT MORNING AT THE OFFICE, he felt the urge and went into his bathroom, flushed the toilet three times, and sat down to do his business. It took about four minutes for the bowel movements to seriously commence, thanks to the unsung sphincter, when he felt something brush across his testicles. Springing up and looking down, he saw the black rat waving its whiskered head back and forth.

“EEEEYOW! EEEYOW!” The Speaker shrieked at the top of his lungs. Once again, his secretary rushed to the door to see if he was in need of help.

“It’s that awful spasm again, Sarah. I’d better see the house doctor. Can you get me an appointment early tomorrow morning?” (He felt awful about lying, but there was no choice.)

The rat was still splashing around languidly, as if it were taking a bath, when he slammed down the toilet cover. He kept flushing the toilet until his back hurt. Quickly, he got a bottle of alcohol from the cabinet, poured it into his hand, and cuddled his balls to disinfect what he could. For good measure, he poured hydrogen peroxide into a cupped hand and rested his balls in that antiseptic liquid.

It turned out that as Sarah returned to her desk, she found The Reporter waiting for one of The Speaker’s assistants who had agreed to be interviewed about some appropriations earmarked for The Speaker’s district. He, too, heard the “EEEEYOW! EEEYOW!”



“Who’s that?” he asked, knowing it came from The Speaker’s suite.

“Sometimes, the water comes out scalding hot, and it catches the person under the shower unaware,” Sarah answered. (She felt awful about lying, but there was no choice.)

Meanwhile, The Speaker, about to burst, had to find an outlet to receive his deposits. Terror-stricken, he sat down on the edge of the bathtub and let it all out, come what may. Fortunately, the stools were very loose, and he quickly washed them down the drain with a tumbler filled with water. He then showered, dried himself, and dressed.

He was late for a meeting over the bill to weaken the Endangered Species Act. The get-together was with The Chairman of the Committee, a guy who hated wolves, a prejudice he had picked up from his upbringing on a cattle ranch in Montana.

The Chairman, whom The Speaker found surrounded by four grim-looking staffers, was determined to gut the law. The Speaker asked him whether he would add an amendment to make rats and cockroaches *more endangered* as species. Everyone thought The Speaker was being funny and didn’t reply. The Speaker did not persist, going along with the chuckles to mask his inner turmoil.

3 • More Bathroom Business

OVER AT THE MINORITY LEADER’S SUITE, the dignified Marcy Melosay was finishing some camouflaged fundraising calls (ones absent a direct ask) when she felt nature’s call. She, too, had trouble moving bowels early in the morning. She had always admired colleagues who could immediately defecate upon rising from bed. Never in her 28 years in the House could she acquire that blessing, that relief from feeling bloated and gassy. As a female public official, she had to be especially careful about farting, even when the gasses were building up to the breaking point. At extreme moments, she would excuse herself by appearing to have a coughing jag, go to her spacious bathroom, and sonorously break the wind.

“Ahh, thank goodness, I made it in time!” she would say to herself.

Today, it was almost noon when she excused herself, but not before telling her assistant to call her sister-in-law and cancel tomorrow’s breakfast. The Minority Leader made a beeline to her own toilet, plunked herself down, and commenced serious discharge. She heard a noise. Lifting herself up and looking down, she saw a black rat smothered with fresh feces.

The reaction from her was an earsplitting, prolonged scream, “Ahhhhh-hhh, ahhhhh, ahhhhhkheee!”



Startled, the rat scurried back down the pipe as The Minority Leader ran from the throne, soiling the floor and nearly tripping on her panties. She rested her trembling hands on the sink. Her longtime assistant, Velvet, rushed to the bathroom door exclaiming, "Miss Melosay, Miss Melosay, do you need anything?"

"Yes, please," The Minority Leader responded just above a whisper. Velvet rushed in and her beloved boss told her what happened between gasps of breath.

A matronly 66-year-old, Velvet cradled Ms. Melosay in her arms and assured her that all is well when it ends well. The rat was probably scared, too, Velvet added reassuringly. The Minority Leader managed a wan smile, but she continued to shake uncontrollably.

"You may wish to take a shower to calm down and soothe your nerves, Ms. Melosay," Velvet suggested. The diminutive Minority Leader nodded. Velvet turned on the spray and adjusted the temperature so The Minority Leader could take a very long shower.

Again, The Reporter just happened to be in the sitting room and heard the screams.

4 • Synchronicity

THE NEXT NOON, The Speaker and The Minority Leader found themselves together at a Joint Session of Congress to honor the return of American Israeli soldiers from crushing Gaza again with weapons made in America. The keynote speaker was the Prime Minister of Israel, whose past addresses to this august body had rated standing applause, coming (on the average) after every 35 words.

Going through the minds of both The Speaker and The Minority Leader was the fear that standing ovations of such frequency would trigger an uncontrollable surge of defecation. Excusing themselves in the midst of this command performance would be disastrous, for without admitting the cause, which would have provoked muffled guffaws, The Speaker and The Minority Leader might be unfairly accused of thinly veiled anti-Semitism. Talk about being between a rock and a hard place.

The standing ovations continued with staccato predictability and reached a crescendo when The Prime Minister declaimed loudly that he was amazed that people didn't realize Iran was the biggest threat to the world since Hitler. It was also amazing, if of less global significance, that when under enormous pressure to contain one's bodily emissions, there is an impressive display of the discipline known as mind over matter. Immediately after the

32nd and last standing ovation, The Speaker quickly and profusely thanked The Prime Minister and the soldiers and adjourned the session. Both he and The Minority Leader raced to their respective restrooms for immediate relief. The Reporter noticed their respective beelines and began to wonder.

For a couple of days, whenever nature called, The Speaker and The Minority Leader made some excuse to use their staffs' toilets, because they couldn't stand the return of the cold fear they'd each experienced in their boudoirs. Lo and behold, one day the staff toilets were occupied, so The Speaker and The Minority Leader both nervously sat down in their own respective spaces, and, once again, in the midst of doing their business, they heard, they rose, they looked, and they screeeeched at the top of their lungs. There was a black, grinning rat in each bowl.

They did what they had to do. The Speaker drained his bathtub. The Minority Leader had to finish her business in her shower stall since, being in the minority, she was not allotted a bathtub. The Minority Leader's confidant, Velvet, learned what had happened to her leader while The Speaker's staff heard about his "spasm" again.

Having not gotten his interview earlier, the same Reporter had returned and once again heard the screams coming from The Minority Leader's interior office suite. His wonder turned into operational curiosity.

The Minority Leader warned Velvet to tell no one about what happened. "NO ONE!"

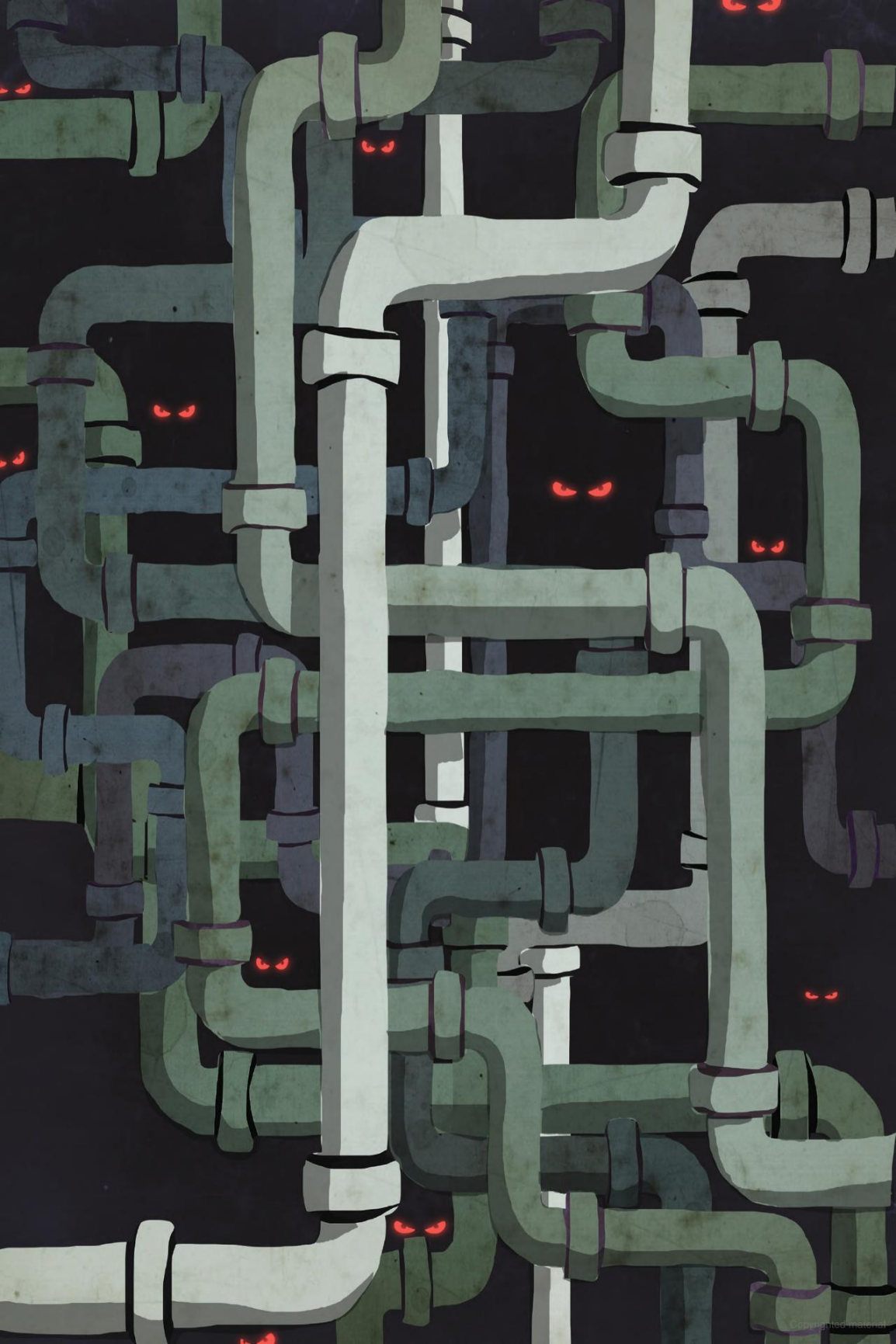
"Why, of course," Velvet replied in a tone that suggested such an admonition was not needed. Leader Melosay told Velvet to get The Speaker on the phone immediately.

5 • A Call to Action

THE SPEAKER PICKED UP HIS PHONE to take the call from The Minority Leader. "Speaker," she told him calmly, "we have a rodent problem. They've been seen scurrying around the carpets in recent days, both rats and mice, which means there are nests. They are probably coming up from the Catacombs beneath the Capitol." (The Minority Leader hated to lie, but there was no choice.)

She asked The Speaker to request an inspection by the rodent and insect extermination unit, which was under the House Administration Committee's jurisdiction.

Of course, The Speaker assured her he would do so immediately and revealed that he, too, had been told by staff that the little creatures were running all over their carpets, as well. (He hated to lie, but there was no choice).



The Minority Leader asserted that the rodent invasion must be systemic, and she joked about the rare bipartisan display of remedial action to come. Lowering his voice, The Speaker suggested that the requested action should be seen as a very routine inspection to avoid the press making more of it than was deserved. The Minority Leader, possessed of similarly sensitive political antennae, agreed and, before closing, requested that her office be given advance notice of the inspectors' arrival and be told what kinds of rodenticide would be employed.

"Will do," said The Speaker. "Talk to you soon."

However, for The Speaker, the matter was not so simple. Suppose the inspectors found nothing — not a hole, not a hair, not a dropping — but, not wanting to disappoint their superiors, they recommended that rat poison be placed around the suites. The Speaker knew that would not solve his problem, which was The Toilet! He could not, would not, give away his secret to the inspectors that rats were bobbing around in his personal commode, for then there would be the inevitable leak. Between the rat in the toilet and the yelling, people would start putting two and two together. With over 450 full-time, snooping reporters covering Capitol Hill — "ditto heads," he derisively called them — plenty would rush to pursue this story.

"They always have an anal complex," The Speaker thought to himself, chuckling over his own wit.

He decided to let his Exterminators do what they urged, if only because their application provided a cover for any later media inquiry. Within a few hours, poison bait and rat traps were situated in circumspect locations around his suite. The Speaker called and told The Minority Leader to schedule a similar remedy for her offices.

Both The Speaker and The Minority Leader knew that this was not going to solve their own very personal problems. The individual rats were entering the toilet bowl from a pipe that was far removed from the rat traps. Neither politician could think of a way to tell the other what each was going through since they did not know they shared a common, horrifying experience. Such was their conundrum.

6 • In the Underground

MEANWHILE, DOWN DEEP in the Capitol's underworld, activity of another sort was taking place. It was going on in a vast subterranean area where gigantic steam pipes sweat side by side with other engineering systems that keep the vast buildings above operating technically, if not legislatively. This is terrain so occupationally hazardous that no member of Congress,

regardless of position or seniority, is allowed to enter the elevators and descend to the bottom. Heavy metal particulates, including asbestos, and noxious emissions have long plagued the small number of security-cleared, skilled workers who complain, to no avail, about their chronic health problems.

For rodents and insects, however, the immense space was a favorite scampering (and camping) ground, but one with few ascending apertures. Except, that is, for the odorous sewage pipes. Rats and mice were curious about these laden pipes, but the water that washed down them irritated their fur. Far more tempting were the crumbs and foodstuffs left overnight or discarded by the workers.

Very recently, however, a startling development had opened new opportunities for the rodents in their nonstop quest for nutrients. (Rats, as noted previously, were known to gnaw through concrete to get to something tasty.)

Both The Speaker and The Minority Leader, importuned by salespeople, had agreed to install electric garbage disposals in their kitchenette sinks. This was for the politicians' convenience when they did not have time to go to lunch or dinner and didn't particularly relish takeout. Their staff could cook something up reflecting their bosses' tastes at the moment. Also, exercising a little *noblesse oblige*, our solons let the cleaning people use the cooking facilities in the evening if those workers had to heat their takeouts.

The cleaners were sternly instructed to leave no crumbs behind. But they let fall down through the grinders a stream of what the rats would call a dream banquet of flavorsome smoothies whose irresistible odor drew these hardy survivalists into bolder and bolder adventures in upward mobility.

Soon the rats realized it was only a frolic and a detour to enter the sewer pipe to the toilet bowl. This would have been an easy connection to make by The Exterminators if only they had been told the real story, which was that the rats were treating the toilets as their private oases.

7 • Rumblings

"WHAT TO DO? WHAT TO DO?" whispered The Speaker to himself, as he was busy over stacks of paperwork or conducting short meetings with legislative assistants and colleagues.

Before leaving for home, he called Regina and asked if he could have a big bowl of boiled prunes with a little ice cream for dessert.

His wife understood and replied, "Why, of course, dear."

Later, at the dinner table, The Speaker consumed every last prune, washing them down with warm water to achieve the desired combination for an

early morning bowel movement to be consummated in his home john. Alas, it was not to be. He left home the next morning still filled. However, by the time his limousine reached the House Office Building, he was feeling a rumble — the deferred prune effect — that reached an intolerable level, nearly overcoming his suppressive mind control. He raced past a startled Sarah into his restroom and, taking no chances, unloaded directly into his bathtub.

“How long can this go on?” he asked himself while breathing a sigh of sublime relief.

Meanwhile, a few miles away at NSA Headquarters, a three-person surveillance team, specializing on Congress, was connecting certain strange dots. Their sensors had picked up the bellows, screams, conversations, and even mutterings of The Speaker and The Minority Leader. At first, they suspected the rats were the products of animal-directed sabotage by terrorists. After all, the CIA, going back decades, had been expertly training ravens, dolphins, cats, and other animals to be carriers for espionage activities. After spending several days sifting and arranging the metadata, the team concluded that the precipitating events were just what they were: *ferae naturae* doing its instinctual thing. Not of concern. However, they parked the information in a specially encrypted electronic file titled, “To be seeded if necessary.”



Two days later, The Reporter was sitting in The Minority Leader’s office, having been given a rain ticket by staffer Joanna Swift, who had had to cancel the prior appointment. Ms. Swift gave as her reason an emergency call that came in from a group of constituents in her boss’s district. But the real cause of cancellation was that Ms. Swift was not fully prepared for the questions that this legendary lone wolf reporter could be expected to ask. (She hated to lie, but there was no choice.)

At 11:00 a.m. sharp, Ms. Swift bounded from her small office to cheerfully greet The Reporter and usher him to a chair by her desk.

“Sorry about last time,” she said.

“Forget it. Things happen,” replied The Reporter.

He adjusted his tape recorder and launched immediately into a touchy subject.

“Before I get into my investigation of what your leadership is doing about timed insider stock trading, revealed recently, as you know, by a freelance author, to be widespread in the House, I’m curious about something else. In the anteroom, I saw two large boxes labeled ‘portable toilets’. Is there something seriously wrong with the plumbing?”

The Reporter looked casual, in a “by-the-way” manner.

Ms. Swift blushed, but, suspicious of his uncharacteristic casualness, felt it was better to reveal some of the truth, and so blurted out, “There’s been a rodent problem we’re having attended to by the House Exterminators.”

“Oh?” said The Reporter. “That’s not so infrequent. But in the toilets?”

“Well ... yes, it actually has been quite frightening,” she responded.

This is where experience comes in. The savvy Reporter skipped the usual follow-up inquiry — “What do you mean?” — and probed, “So, that’s what the screams were about from The Minority Leader’s suite when I was here waiting the other day.”

Ms. Swift felt a trap was about to be sprung. She wasn’t supposed to know what only The Minority Leader and Velvet knew, but “mum’s the word” has a notoriously short life in Congressional offices. Now she was facing double jeopardy: letting a reporter, no less, know what she wasn’t supposed to know herself.

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about. Screams? I didn’t hear any screams.”

Her office was on the side of the suite where the staffers did hear the screams. (She hated to lie, but there was no choice.)

“Can we get back to your interest in what The Minority Leader is doing about the report of insider trading among some of her fellow Democrats?”

“Yes, yes, by all means,” rasped The Reporter, who knew he was on to what his colleagues would call a very high-rated story. But he decided it was best not to press any further with this inadvertent informer.

8 • Out of the Bag

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, The Minority Leader returned to her offices and was pleased with the sight of the portable toilets. It wasn’t fun exercising bowel movements in a shower stall. In a moment of collegiality, she called The Speaker and told him of her temporary solution. The Speaker, smiling to himself, told her that “great minds think alike,” and that his portable toilets had arrived today as well.

The Minority Leader wondered, “Does the plural mean that the problem has spread to other toilets in your suite?”

“Well, yes, as a matter of fact. How about for you?”

“It has. In another bathroom, my assistant came upon a dead mouse floating in the bowl. It was too much for her, and she had to go home early,” averred The Minority Leader, in an upset tone.

“Wow, wow, do you think the *rat* is out of the bag, so to speak?” said The Speaker with high concern.

“Not if I can help it, but I may not be able to help it,” worried The Minority Leader.

“You took the words out of my mouth.”

Ms. Melosay replied, “We’d better stay in close touch, Mr. Blamer.”

Brought together by the common problem, they were already on a last-name basis.

9 • Party Time I

THAT NIGHT, the nocturnal rodents, down deep in the Congressional Catacombs, were having a ball. More than bits of food were everywhere. Whole chunks had been cast aside by the workers who were celebrating the retirement of one of their crew (sadly, he had incurable emphysema). And what chunks: fish, chicken, and steak bones that were easily accessible in overflowing, uncovered trash cans. The rats, with their ever-growing incisors, loved the bones.

At the same time, the regular Thursday evening “small parties of relief,” as they were called, were underway upstairs, put together by staffers whose bosses were returning to their districts until the next week’s Tuesday-through-Thursday work period came around. The food digesters (i.e., garbage disposals) in The Speaker’s and The Minority Leader’s offices were kept busy, which, in turn, kept the sewer rats and mice deliciously busy, eating and populating. Well-fed and protected from most predators, the litters poured out of the mothers’ wombs in their dark nests.

The staff flushed away quite a few visiting rats in the regular toilet bowls, more with disgust than fear now that they were using portable toilets themselves. They still expected The Exterminators to eventually enforce eradication. The staff members were oblivious to the fact that the rat killers did not know about the toilet bowl visits and so were concentrating their poisons and traps in nooks and crannies away from the main rat pathways.

10 • A Clean Breast

ARRIVING AT HOME FOR DINNER with Regina, The Speaker was unusually troubled, as his wife recognized by noting how he raised his eyebrows in fast succession. His wife rarely saw such signs of deep worry. “Tell me, dear,



what is eating at you these days? There is nothing in the news that could explain your vintage eyebrow flutters.”

The Speaker sighed deeply, thinking that if he couldn't divulge what was happening — his private, personal secret — to his beloved wife of 42 years who knew every inch of his body, who else could he reveal it to? The moon? So he began.

“My dear, something is happening in my office. No, it doesn't involve great matters of state or whispers of some forthcoming exposé of corruption in the House of Representatives. To cut to the chase, it involves rats coming up inside my toilet while I am sitting ... yes, sitting answering nature's call. I heard splashes, and a rat brushed against my testicles before I leapt up screaming. When my staff came running, I made up the excuse that it was an old spasm acting up suddenly.” He then recounted what had transpired afterward.

Regina was still puzzled. It wasn't her husband's fault in any way.

“Why are you so upset?” she asked.

The Speaker put down his fork and took a deep breath. “My dear, if this situation reached the media, it would be very serious for your poor husband. Politics is all about deception, distraction, and appearances. Take away the appearance, the decorum, the surface dignity and neatness, and all hell will start to break loose. Once we are mocked, satirized, and laughed at due to a story that is tailor-made for public ridicule by just about every part of the news and entertainment business, we will lose the sheen that glosses over what we're doing and not doing. That varnish is keeping us low in the polls, but not affecting our re-elections. It's about the consequences of the Emperor having no clothes!

“Consider the meticulous attention we give to appearances, to the protective gloss. We are immaculately dressed. You instinctually grasp this whenever, before I leave for work in the morning, you point out a slight slant to my tie or a wisp of hair sticking out of my coif. Notice that when you see members of Congress head for the floor with their entourage, you can always tell the legislator as the one who is erect, striding forward with confidence. Posture is crucial to an appearance of stature and dignity. It's maintained with aplomb by a legislator even after he's gone through such sordid exposés as being caught frequenting prostitutes, cheating on his wife, or thrashing others in alcoholic fits.”

At this point, Regina wasn't sure if her husband was talking to her or giving a speech, but she listened patiently.

“Consider how daily attention by a large cleaning and maintenance staff is given to our offices, our corridors, our hearing rooms, the furniture, the flags, and the plaques. These are all symbols that protect our appearance