

INDIGO

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*Excerpt*

The label was doubly and triply unfair, I said to Julia, for it had been proven that rats were the most remarkable creatures on the whole planet, even more fascinating than the immortal jellyfish *Turritopsis nutricula* or that mysterious species of sea cucumber whose cells at a certain point in their development stop aging. Rats, I said, were organized according to an infinitely complex social hierarchy, so multilayered and rich with nuances that it naturally struck us human observers in most instances as a chaotic swarm, a senselessly teeming mass. The exact opposite was the case, every rat had in its head a precise image of the entire rat population to which it belonged, and when one died, its place in the larger whole shifted by a microscopic unit down or up, left or right, as the case might be; the rat population in the subterranean worlds of cities, in the sewers or subway shafts, was comparable to a school of fish held together by inscrutable, probably ancient lines of communication, the density and the connective element of water were merely replaced among them by something that was not yet known to us, possibly one of those morphic field things, I said, but as those are a pure article of faith, we of course couldn't believe in them.

– Maybe we have to imagine it like that zone game, have I ever told you about that before?

Julia linked arms with me and said:

– Tell me more about rats instead.

– Rats, okay. Let's talk about rats. Rats are more important.

– Go ahead.

– Well, they exist in that in-between area that divides bedrock and earth's crust from modern civilization, and of course a few people live there too, mostly homeless people, and it depends, of course, on the particular city whether they can really live there or just go there to die. I once saw a report about people in disused tunnels. There were a few creepy things in it, for example, someone lay for a whole month with a deep wound somewhere underground where it was damp and muddy, and when he thought he could get up again, he had grown together with some sort of pipe that came out of the ground or something.

– Yeah, *or something*.

– I'm not making this up! You can check, the film must be publicly accessible, if it was on television, I assume...Anyway, they did this interview with him, it was totally sick, because...they interviewed him while he's there with his head on the ground and so on, that was so perverse I had to change the channel. Well, anyway, as for rats, they have this infinitely ramified and intricate social system, okay? And it's so tightly woven that they sense precisely when another rat, say, one that occupies a higher position, is in trouble or when it has self-doubt or has gotten lost. But they don't help it, because they're not human beings, after all, right? For them the whole social thing works differently.

Well, and...they have this structure and...and that's not all, though, because the network, it's so fine that they often even include inanimate objects, as symbolic fellow creatures, so to speak, honorary rats. Those could be objects that are important for the preservation of the population as a whole, a dripping heating pipe in a shaft, for example, or the sun, or, I don't know, the grate of a ventilation shaft through which a particularly large number of cigarettes always fall. Things like that. In general, rats think always only in total populations, never only in families or clans or packs. They're egoists anyway, of course. That's easy to understand, too, in terms of game theory, because...um...take, for example, a business in the human world, okay? For example, a company that produces only weapons and, I don't know, sells terrible nerve gas grenades to some other dubious companies and nothing but irresponsible crap like that, but every individual in the business, every human being is a really nice, friendly citizen, who wants only to pay for his children's college, who is content when he sits in the garden with a cigar in his mouth in the evening after his work is done or when he rearranges the stones in his garden so that, seen from above, they make a geometric message, or when he sits in front of the computer and watches harmless movies with weeping women. Completely normal people, men and women, nice and good-natured, even reasonable. And that goes all the way up to the top, only with different accessories and in luxury apartments, but...where was I? Rats, they...

– Read me some graffiti, said Julia.

We were passing the wall at the far end of the park, which was updated regularly by its stewards armed with spray cans.

(...)

– Rats, I said, are completely different from dogs.

– Really? In what way?

– Well, dogs have been bred by us, in painstaking work from generation to generation. But what was actually the point of the slow breeding of the canine species? Guarding the property boundaries and flocks of sheep, man's playmate, well, all right...The result is this strange love machine that worships its master...Maybe that was the plan, too, to create an animal with which we could communicate. A sentimental companion to make the loneliness of our own species seem less complete, less unbroken and absolute...

I noticed that my voice had again taken on a life of its own, and paused, focusing on the brown-trodden gravel on the park path.

– Yes, that must be what's behind the friendship between man and dog that's lasted thousands of years, I said. Every temperament, every shape of the human heart is reflected in a particular breed of dog. The dog is a creature we can actually prefer to other people, you know? Gradually, over the many, many generations in which it was kept in human company, it learned to feel emotions similar to ours, separation anxiety, I don't know, obsessive-compulsive disorder, fear of death, hysteria, none of that is unknown to the dog, probably even anorexia and bulimia, a dog...a dog can fall just as easily into one of those states as its owner. But it's still not in the same boat as us, that's why we can look at it without horror, without our deep-rooted need to destroy every simulacrum.

– Mmmh, Julia said, holding my arm somewhat tighter.

– But look at the life they lead, I said, gesturing to the small dog bustling about among the bushes. You live with large figures uttering incomprehensible sounds who are

in command of food, toys and your chances of running around outside. You wander all around for hours alone with them and suddenly you discover at the end of a promenade or on the other side of the street someone who speaks the same language, who has a tail and ears, who would even like to approach and present himself – and then you're yanked back by a rope, forbidden to move one centimeter toward the other. And with time that forceful jerk is transferred to your mind, you feel it inwardly when you see a fellow member of your species, and eventually there's nothing but enemies, each with its own prohibited-area radius around it, and when...and when these radii then, then intersect, you panic, pull and pull and bark and have to be calmed down.

Julia's hand on my cheek was cool.

– Banksy rat, I said softly. Banksy rat.