

THE COLD ROOM

by Lowry Pei

The dogs were the worst. He found it hard to work up much sympathy for rats, and he was thankful they were the only animals he had to work with – injecting them, sticking tubes into them, changing their plumbing, draining their blood for analysis. Some technicians had to deal with cows or pigs, which were too big to be moved from place to place, and usually ended up imprisoned in a lab built around them, where no one ever saw them but the people who tended their cables and tubes. Bats were too small and strange to care about, and laboratory rabbits were almost too stupid. But the cats bothered him, and the dogs were the worst. Especially when at the end of the day he took the dead rats – bulges in bloody plastic bags, their dead tails no longer pink but white like the rest of them – down to the cold room. He opened the heavy door, like that on a meat locker, and threw the sack toward one of the garbage cans inside, trying not to see the fifty-five-gallon drums of dead dogs. The dogs that wouldn't fit into the drums lay stiffening in transparent green bags on the floor. He held his breath while doing this, and if the rats missed the garbage can he didn't go inside to pick them up.

The rat room stank, but Jackson was used to it. The first time he had come down to inject the rats at 8:10 on a Monday morning he had thought the smell would drive him out of the room. It was still bad on Mondays, if the weekend crew hadn't bothered to clean that particular room, but in general the rat room was bearable. Perhaps he was learning how to turn off his nose. Sometimes Jackson and the other technicians would even hang around for a few minutes after they'd finished weighing and feeding and injecting, just to get away from the

Chief and his post-docs, and look at other people's rats to pass the time – especially the huge old slow ones, weighing over half a kilo, that lived one to a cage like solitary pets.

On this particular day Jackson left the rat room by himself, having come down in mid-morning to see if the previous day's surgical work had survived. As he passed down the dingy hallway, toward the double doors that led to the hospital proper, he heard shouting and scuffling behind him. Turning, he saw a furry grey dog bounding at him, away from two technicians and a wheeled cage. The dog ran straight to him, happy and friendly, unlike the sullen curs who filled most of the cages; it seemed half-grown, still puppyish in its reactions. Apparently it had already forgotten the other two technicians and the cage. He hunkered down and clicked his tongue to the dog, holding out his hands; it ran around him, wagging its hindquarters, while he petted it on the run. Then he stopped the dog, putting an arm around its chest, and it jumped up on him, licking at his face. Jackson stood up, lifting the dog off the floor, and handed it to the two technicians, who had approached with the cage. "Thanks," they said, threw the dog in, and trundled it off.

After they had banged through the double doors, Jackson stood still in the hallway, fingering the bottles and syringes in his lab coat pockets, frowning at the floor. Giving back the dog had been an automatic response. Been here too long, he thought. But what choice did he have? Refuse to give it back, run off with it across the parking lot, lose his job, leave town to avoid the police – all for one dog?

The scene returned to him over and over, throughout the day. The grey dog had approached him with the joy of discovering a new friend – and he had given it back, to be taken upstairs and have clever anastomoses made in its circulatory system that would eventually mean liver failure, hypertension, a heart attack. The incident seemed like a message he ought not to ignore, as if words had been spoken to him about the urgency of loving – how there might be only a moment to make the choice, and never a second chance. It was a hot day, and the air conditioner in the lab worked poorly; heat radiated from the dissecting lamp, and on the counter behind him the dead rats faintly stank.

The Chief's graduate student, whom they had all come to hate, was driving the technicians to finish his thesis experiments – as he had done for weeks – so they did not get out of the lab until nearly 5:30. Jackson took down two heavy plastic bags of dead rats and threw them into the cold room on the way out, taking a quick, reluctant look to find out if the grey dog was there yet. He didn't see it.

It was hot outside, and still a couple of hours until sunset. Jackson had never known what hot was until he had moved to Kentucky. The low sun was an inexorable presence, beating into his face as he walked across the parking lot to his car.

Home, he said hello to the cat (imagining it briefly, as usual, with a tube in its neck), made himself a drink of cheap gin and cheap tonic, turned on his hi-fi (watching the exposed tubes of the amplifier glow into life), put on a record of Satie he had nearly played to death. The simple chords of the "Gymnopedie" crossed the air of the room. His lifeline. There was no mail. He picked up the book he was halfway through and began reading, about being a warrior, about waiting for one's will, about acquiring patience.

In a few minutes he made another gin-and-tonic and put a pot of leftover stew on the stove. He turned the record over. It was hot in the apartment, but he refused to turn on the air conditioner; that processed air smelled too much like the hospital. He sweated and chewed on ice cubes.

He continued to read while he ate dinner.

He put his plate on the floor for the cat.

The dishes were beginning to pile up. Not that he had many.

He wanted another gin-and-tonic, but he was afraid of getting in the habit of drinking too much, and besides, gin was expensive.

It was finally beginning to cool off. The crickets were loud outside.

He was bored, but there was no one he wanted to call, and in any case, he was waiting for Debbie to call and say when she was coming in from Boston. Out the open window he watched the lights blink on the smokestack of the power plant, wondering if they had ever prevented a plane from crashing into it. Expecting the phone to ring put him on edge – he dreaded the sound. Even when the phone sat silent he had the feeling it was watching him, that through it Debbie could monitor his thoughts as precisely as he could a rat's blood pressure. She knew when he was attracted to another woman before he did. But what rat ever unhooked himself, got up off the workbench and walked away?

He drank another gin-and-tonic and went to bed; lying there, he thought of what the telephone, and therefore Debbie, must know.

He had met Janet at a party in Lexington. They were sitting in a circle of eight or ten, making conversation with different people; they had talked to each other for a few minutes an hour earlier. She had a delicate face and yet her mouth could widen humorously in a way that

convinced him she knew more than she was telling. The room crowded in on him, full of people who took up more space in the world than he felt entitled to. He sat in a chair, she on the floor at his left, and when she bent forward, exposing the nape of her neck, Jackson felt a tenderness that overpowered him and made him reach toward her. He gave himself up for a fool as his hand covered that vulnerable spot, but she did not flinch, or move away. As if she had understood before he did, she looked at him once. Her eyes were open and so were his; then she went on with her conversation. After living alone in a strange town for a year, working in a rat lab, waiting for the mail, Jackson felt life start up in him again, something other than endurance take over the controls.

They kept talking to other people, and his hand kept caressing her neck; awareness of that touch drowned out every word, and yet it was a secret. Then those other people moved away, and they turned to each other. They squeezed themselves into the chair and held hands, and felt their legs touching, and talked. Later, when the crowd had thinned out, they leaned against a wall in the hallway, kissing. Some people passed by and smirked, but Jackson hardly noticed. Her wanting him filled him with huge surprise, as if a secret order of things were being revealed to him for the first time.

When they left into the frosty night it was nearly first light. Jackson lived seventy miles away, in Louisville, but he could not leave her. She said he could come over for a while.

When they reached her apartment it was dawn, and he wanted her absolutely. He knelt, face against her body, his hands under her sweater, touching her breasts, her back.

No, she said, she could not go to bed with him. He picked her up and carried her to the bed a few feet away, laid her on it, lay down beside her.

“If someone had told me last night that I’d be lying in bed with you this morning, I’d have said they were crazy,” she said, but she made no resistance as he drew her sweater over her head, she slid her fingers onto his chest as he unbuttoned his shirt, and neither of them said anything more.

When they got up it was Sunday afternoon. Bright sun beat against a windowful of plants so thick they almost blocked the light. On an impulse of hers, they went out to Lexington’s dinky, antiquated airport and watched the infrequent traffic come and go. She said she liked to stand at the windows of the little terminal and think about leaving, about how she could go from there to any place she could afford, fast, and all he could think was, Don’t go.

When it began to get dark and cold, they went back to her apartment and made love again, this time in darkness, with the alcohol out of their bodies; afterwards, Jackson felt so at home he was afraid to notice the feeling in case it might go away.

“I’ve got to go have dinner at my parents’,” she said, when they were getting dressed again. “Want to come? I’d love for them to meet you.”

He had been profoundly uninterested in everyone but her since the night before; now the social world came back all at once and scared him.

“I really have to go back. But thank you.”

“Come on, there’ll be lots of people there, we do it every couple of weeks.”

Lots of people – no, there had to be some excuse. “Do you really think it’s a good idea? I mean, you just picked me up at a party last night,” he said with a lame smile, trying to pass it off as a joke.

“Suit yourself,” she said, turning around sharply and going to the closet.

“I’m sorry,” Jackson said to her back. The flash of anger had seemed to wake him from a half-dream he had been in all day, and, waking, he remembered for the first time that it had seemed crazy to hope they could be joined. He thought of the lab, taking orders from the Chief, the evenings silent except for the record player. Something amazing had happened. All at once he was uncertain what to do. She stepped into her shoes. “It doesn’t matter,” she said, turning around and coming back to him. “You can come over some other time.”

After that they saw each other every couple of weeks. At first they parted each time with nothing arranged except that they would be together again; then they began to write to each other and plan their next weekend. She never mentioned the Sunday dinners at her family’s house again; when it came to be late Sunday afternoon, Jackson drove home, and ate dinner by himself.

The fourth time they were together she told him that his lovemaking was not as gentle as it had been, there was something rough and distant about it. He knew it was true. They had never, either of them, spoken the word “love” to the other, but Jackson thought of saying it every day. He thought of how her shoulders felt, or the red in her hair under strong sunlight, or the way her eyes would mock him and then go serious, letting him in again. Without expecting to, he admired her, he could not hear her voice enough. For hours he would forget everything but her. He did not want to be reminded that when he went home to the apartment he never dared take her to, the telephone

would be there, watching him and listening. The harshness was for that, and she felt it. She didn't ask him what caused it; he didn't ask her what she did on the weekends when she couldn't see him.

One night he put a letter to her and a letter to Debbie in the mailbox at the same time; as they tumbled in together, he was seized with a sudden fear that he might have put them in the wrong envelopes, and then he realized that something had to change.

Debbie was thirty-six, divorced, eleven years older than Jackson. They had gone to the same graduate school; by the end of a year they were living together. For Jackson, it had been like walking in on a marriage at the five-year mark. Ceremonies of intimacy waited in the rooms of her house like furniture. How to have a drink before dinner (he toasting, "Happy days"; she, "and happy nights"); how to have elegant Sunday breakfasts; how to celebrate holidays – she taught him these things. To Jackson it was like being transported overnight to some part of the future. He hardly knew what was happening to him, except that he was in over his head, and that much of the time he was happy. He was both frightened and proud that he lived with a grown woman, a whole being, unlike the younger women his friends went out with. He never had to invent something to do.

But he wanted to do the starting of things, that was the point. When he saw that Debbie avoided single men her own age, he felt more trapped than relieved. The sensation ate at him, isolated him with her. After a year and a half he knew it was time for them to give it up; he felt sure she knew it too, and he expected her to take the initiative, but she did not. His moving away did not seem enough to tip the balance. He tried to tell himself that being with Janet made no difference to him and Debbie, but apparently he had to choose one or the other, and the one he had to choose was Debbie. He could not be the one to say "the end"; she had handed him a life, and if he could not go on loving her, what was he?

"Look, you don't just write somebody and say 'I've got this other girlfriend,'" Janet said, late on a Saturday afternoon. "How am I supposed to know what you really mean in a letter? I spent the last four days wondering what the secret message is."

"There isn't one."

"Come on, there is, of course there is. All it takes is the nerve to say it." It was dusk, and they hadn't turned a lamp on yet; in the dimness of her living room her eyes flashed angrily at him and away from him.

“I’ve got a secret too,” she said in a different tone, after a silence. “I was almost thinking of marrying him last winter, right before we met.”

Fear and astonishment shot through Jackson; an abyss seemed to open behind his heels. His own audacity, in retrospect, was staggering.

“And now?” he said, in place of all the other questions he wanted to ask, that would have involved the word “love.”

“I don’t know. I used to see him every weekend when you weren’t here. I don’t like that – being divided. For a while I thought about not seeing you any more.”

He remembered what his life had been like before they had met, how often she entered his mind as he endured the routine of the lab. He touched her arm hesitantly, wanting to hold her.

“Does she know about me?” Janet said.

“No.”

“George knows about you.” But she turned toward him.

Gradually, unwillingly, he ceased to call her; he wrote less and less. He thought of her every day. Debbie, to whom his love was due, was coming in the middle of July, as had been planned for months.

On the Fourth of July, as Jackson sat listening to a baseball game and drinking his third gin-and-tonic of the afternoon, the phone rang. For a moment he entertained the thought that Debbie might not be coming.

“Hello, Jackson,” Janet said.

How could he not have known that this would happen some day, that there would be pain? He was half-drunk and glad of it.

“I’ve missed you,” he said, hating himself.

“All you have to do is call.”

Silence.

“I know,” he mumbled, miserable.

“What is going on in your head, anyway? Don’t you think I’m worth talking to long enough to say ‘This is it’? Or what is the message?”

“It’s about Debbie,” he said with great reluctance. “It’s about what you said, about being divided...”

“I didn’t stop seeing you, did I?”

“It’s a thing about loyalty, I don’t know what else to say.”

He could hear her crying angrily, and wished that he were dead, that anything had happened but this.

“I never said it was easy – do you think it’s been easy for me the last six months? I’ve been waiting to hear from you for weeks, do you know that?”

He forced words out one by one. “I felt like I owed it to her.”

“Owed her what? To hurt me?”

Silence.

“Well, what’s all this been about, then? Look, I don’t give a damn about her or how you feel about her, I just need you over here right now.”

“I want to be there, you must know that. I’ve never been more sorry about anything in my whole damn life.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry,” she said in a barely audible voice, “I want you to come over.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“Jackson,” she cried, “who the hell is living your *life*?” but before he even understood the question, the line went dead.

Debbie got off the plane in a white suit, elegant, self-possessed; as always he had partly forgotten how she looked, the quality of her being, and was surprised for a moment, like a spectator, at the idea of this woman flying a thousand miles to be in the arms of a twenty-five-year-old lab technician.

The eating and drinking and talking were the same; the lovemaking was not. After the first time he hardly wanted her. He worked hard to hide it; she wanted him very much.

“God, it’s been forever,” she said on Saturday night. “For some reason all the men I meet are singularly unattractive.”

“That’s too bad,” he said.

“And you?”

He hesitated. “Oh – I hardly meet anyone, you know.”

She said nothing. Like the telephone.

In the morning, when he did not want to lie in bed once they were awake, she said, “Jackson, are you in love with someone else?”

His heart pounded. “What?” he said, hopping on one foot as he pulled on his pants. “No, of course not.” He hurried into the bathroom.

Sunday breakfast dragged uncomfortably.

Driving in his car in the afternoon, she said, “Why don’t you just tell me and get it over with?”

“Nothing to tell.” He kept his eyes on the road.

After dinner she said, "Jackson, there's no point in playing games. You've been acting peculiar ever since I got here and I want to know what's going on."

"What do you mean, peculiar?"

"You're just not interested. It's like I'm taking up time you want for something else. Which is a hell of a welcome after all our letters, and not seeing each other since Christmas."

He was silent, staring into his third drink. It had been two weeks since he had spoken to Janet.

"If you didn't want me here you could have said so and saved me a lot of time and money."

"That's not true, it's not true I don't want you here, it's just that –"

"That what?"

"Nothing."

"You've been seeing somebody," she said with dreadful sadness, like a rejected child.

"Sort of," he muttered, looking away.

"Look, just tell me the truth. Can you manage that much consideration for my feelings?"

"Yes. I was seeing somebody for a while."

"And?"

"And I stopped."

"What's the matter, did the novelty wear off?"

He looked straight at her for a moment. "Stopped because of you."

"What's her name?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Where'd you meet her, at the hospital? How old is she?"

"I met her at a party."

"So you met her at a party – after writing me you're so lonely and sad, and me wasting all kinds of sympathy on you – and then what happened?"

"How much difference does it make exactly what happened? What do you think happened?" He heard his own cynical tone and despised himself.

"And who took the initiative?"

"We both did."

"No. Somebody had to start first."

"Okay, it was me – does that satisfy you? – it was me." He got up and went to the refrigerator, made another gin-and-tonic, keeping his back to her.

“Satisfy me?” she burst out suddenly. “Satisfy me that I’ve been up in Boston writing you letters about how much I miss you when you’re down here screwing some...” Jackson stood by the divider between the kitchen and the living room, watching her work up her anger, trying to stifle his own rage. He took two gulps out of his drink.

“That’s it, drink it up, have another one, then you won’t have to think about it. That’s what Rick always did.” The way she pronounced the name made Jackson think he didn’t ever want to hate anybody that much. He sat down on the table at which they had eaten dinner and stared at the floor, sweating. The cat, crouched beneath the table, stared back at him. This was what he got, he thought, for not having the courage to tell her months before.

“Can’t you even say anything?”

No, he thought. After a long while he said, “What’s the point?”

She stood up and walked past him toward the bedroom. “The point is that if there was an airplane out of this dump tonight I’d be on it, and the point is that there is one tomorrow and I will.” As she passed him, her body shrank from him in a melodramatic way he could scarcely believe. She slammed the door, and through it he heard her fall on the bed and start to cry.

Jackson sat slumped, drink in hand, while the ice melted and she cried. He had made two women, at least one of whom he loved, desperately unhappy within the space of two weeks. He deserved some sort of medal, he thought, paralyzed.

He stayed there, blankly wretched, for over an hour, trying to get up the resolve to go in the bedroom, to do his duty, whatever in the world that might be. Finally he turned out the lights in the front room. There was silence from within. As soundlessly as possible he opened the door and entered the bedroom. Debbie lay face down on the bed, her head turned away from him, her feet over the side. Thinking of the discomfort of waking that way, Jackson approached her and began to ease one of them off.

“Don’t touch me,” she said, wide awake. He almost jumped back. She kicked the shoes off, hard, and curled up on her side facing the wall.

For five minutes Jackson stood listening to himself breathe and trying not to make even that sound. Then gingerly he sat down on the bed, and, a minute or two later, put his hand on her shoulder. There was no response.

“Debbie – “

“Don’t talk to me. If you want the other half of the bed, you can have it, but I’d prefer it if you’d leave me in peace.”

She twitched his hand off her shoulder violently. As if in slow motion, cringing at every creak of the bedsprings, he stretched himself out on the bed.

He could not imaginably sleep. It was hot and he was still fully dressed. The silence was unendurable.

An hour later she said, in the same cold, wide-awake voice, “I don’t think you know what it means to love anybody.”

He lay still, his head over the edge of the bed, one hand grasping the metal frame.

“I think you’re right,” he finally said. It was a superhuman effort to say anything. If what she said was true, why should he bother to move, to speak at all?

“You think you can just give in like that and get some sympathy – ‘poor me, I’m so awful’ – I know that game.”

He wanted to vomit out the guilt, expel it in one black pile, or have it cut out, like taking a core through a geological sample. “I’m –

“I! All the time I! Can’t you even talk without saying ‘I’ all the time?”

He did not want to talk, ever again, most particularly never to talk to the woman who lay beside him. He hated her, and that proved that she was right. He must not hate her. If he were not to go on being the heartless bastard she had proved him to be, he must say something, and yet what could he say that would prove him to be otherwise?

“Are you just going to lie there? Or are you going to go to sleep again, like you usually do when somebody starts telling you the truth about yourself? Why don’t you get up and drink the rest of that bottle of gin, so you won’t have to think about it?”

He lay for a long time contemplating that possibility, that he should do it, flauntingly, admitting that he was hateful. He could not do it because he could not move, and because he wanted to do it, and because he could not face the notion of abandoning decency altogether. And yet finally he did move, swinging one leg out of bed, then the other, letting himself slide down off the bed onto hands and knees on the floor, heavy, slack, his mouth open in the dark. He stayed there on all fours for what seemed a long time before he could muster the ability to stand up and move toward the bedroom door. He could feel the force of her hatred against his back.

The gin bottle stood on a narrow counter between the kitchen and the rest of the front room. He picked it up and looked at it in the dim light from outside. It was over half full. He put his hand to the top as if to unscrew it, but did not; instead, he took hold of the bottle by the

neck, holding it like a club. His eyes wandered over the room. He was a hateful person, self-centered; self-centered even in thinking he was hateful. He walked to the stereo and brought the bottle down on its amplifier, smashing its tubes; the bottle broke against its transformers, and gin poured over the chassis. He dropped the neck of the bottle on top of the wreckage, breathing cold ginsmell, and stood over it in silence, eyes closed in the dark.

“And what was that?”

He almost fell asleep standing up before he answered.

“The record player.”

“I suppose you think that proves something,” she muttered, and began to cry again. Jackson was more exhausted than he had ever been in his life; he returned to the bedroom and lay on the bed, as close to the edge as possible.

At seven the alarm went off. Jackson got up, still dressed, his shoes still on, barely able to stand, and left the bedroom.

While he ate breakfast he cried, and part of his mind watched him do both these things at once and dully said, Get on with it.

There had not been a sound from the bedroom by the time he left.

All day, by the hot glare of the dissecting lamp, he cut away a patch of skin from an anesthetized rat’s neck, dug down with a pair of hemostats between two muscles, found the carotid artery, occluded it so that the blood would not spurt out when he cut into it, made a tiny hole with a pair of eye-surgery scissors, worked a saline-filled cannula into the artery, tied it in, turned on the strip-chart recorder, took a twenty-minute record of the rat’s systolic, diastolic, and mean pressure, its heart rate and body temperature, turned off the recorder, tied off the artery, pulled the cannula out and flushed it, gave the rat an overdose of anesthetic and put it on a counter to die out of the way. Over and over. He drank burned-tasting coffee that felt as though it were poisoning him. His hands shook slightly. He was too tired to sweat. He worked. The clock hands crawled. He didn’t care.

At five o’clock he took the dead rats down in the service elevator and threw them in the cold room. Holding the door open, he was too exhausted to feel the usual repulsion. He stepped in and let the heavy door close behind him; the hair rose slightly on the back of his neck. The dead dog on the top of the drum was still limp; the ones under it had stiffened into a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle. He pulled them out, one by one, by their rigid legs, looking dispassionately at the holes in their sides, their forced-open chests. He made himself continue, even when he had to reach all the way to the bottom, so that his head was

inside the drum. All the dogs were on the floor. The grey dog was not among them. So that meant it was still alive, unless it had died already and been hauled off to the rendering plant. He didn't know how often they were taken away. Jackson sat down with his back to the wall and thought, Tomorrow, if the dog's still alive, I'll steal it and move to Lexington. It was pleasant to think so. As he sat there the cold floor warmed under his hand until its temperature reminded him of the fine dust of the softball field at his grade school, which he had once loved to sift through his fingers like cool water. Then he fell into a kind of daze, a quiet blankness, until a technician from another lab, coming in with a dead rabbit, looked wild-eyed at the scattered dogs and sent him out, half-frozen, into the summer dusk.

The warmth of the air was incomprehensible, the smell of it perfection after the air of the cold room. The low sun felt like a hot shower. Even the heat of his car, closed up all day in the sun, was momentarily tolerable. He rolled down the windows and began to drive.

A block from home it occurred to him that Debbie might still be there. He turned in the opposite direction and drove aimlessly until he came to a phone booth.

The sound of long-distance, electronic wind. What in God's name would his explanation be? Through the smudged glass, as the phone began to ring, he could see motorists driving their cars with purposeful faces, with determination, as if getting home were a matter of life or death. She had looked at him only once, when he had touched the back of her neck with his hand, and that had been enough. If only he could knock at her door immediately, be present and let her see him, then she would know. But somehow he would have to say.

"Hello?"

He was not quite ready; but relief rose in him like vertigo, sent him spinning past everything that would be difficult, in the moment before he could begin.

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