

Rats

by Stephen Jay Blumberg, MSPE

(The following story is based on true events.)



Seventy-five years ago, in Center City Philadelphia, Gimbels Department Store was plagued by rats. After the store shut down each night, these nasty creatures caused all sorts of damage on every floor of the building; and their excrement had to be removed before opening for business each morning. The little rat *turdlets* would be found not only all over the floors and countertops but even inside the display cases. Rats were chewing through wires, causing power outages in multiple departments. They were gnawing through cardboard boxes containing brand-new furniture, then tearing through the fabric to get at the stuffing. They found their way into the vending machines, helping themselves to the snacks and cigarettes they found inside. The problems they caused were endless. Nothing in the store was safe from their filthy mouths.

Management tried everything they could think of to deal with the problem, all to no avail. Exterminator after exterminator had been brought in to attempt a solution. All of them had used conventional techniques. None were successful. Traps would catch an occasional victim, but it was obvious that it was a very large rat population they were trying to eradicate. The exterminators would find that the poisoned

bait they had put out every night was still undisturbed the following morning. Harold Flynn, the harried store manager, held at least one staff meeting each week, during which he implored every employee to help to find someone capable of solving this extremely disturbing and costly problem.

Finally, Mr. Flynn's secretary, Ms. Marjorie Styne, suggested placing a unique advertisement in the help-wanted and personals sections of both the *Morning Inquirer* and the *Evening Bulletin*,

the two daily Philadelphia newspapers. She was promptly appointed to accomplish the task. Ms. Styne had a direct telephone line at her desk, so she placed the following ad, to run daily until canceled by her: "Looking for the REAL Pied Piper; call City5559."

She answered dozens of phone calls over the next few days, none of them having anything to do with *the problem*. Then there was one that seemed very interesting. A man called, saying he was a veteran, having served 20 years in the US Navy. He was pretty sure he knew what she was looking for, and he just might be her man. She made an appointment to meet him for breakfast the next morning at the Horn & Hardart Automat, a self-serve restaurant right across the street from Gimbels. She wanted to keep her story confidential, in order to shield the store's reputation, until she was certain this man was the one she needed.

The next morning at the restaurant, a stalwart man who appeared to be in his mid-40s approached Ms. Styne's table and introduced himself as retired Chief Petty Officer James Blank. She invited him to sit and to tell her what he thought she wanted. He said, "Pretty sure what

you've got is what I think is too many rats. Pied Piper, indeed! I have some experience dealing with too many rats. Think maybe I can help you out."

Still without disclosing the name of the department store, Ms. Styne described in detail as much of the history as she knew, which was pretty much everything. He told her that he had a method that works. He assumed, correctly, that the premise involved was either a large factory or some other similarly sized place of business. "If the building has a basement, you'll have to set it up exactly as I tell you. If you can do that, exactly, I can pretty much guarantee a result you'll like." She finally told him the location. He said, "If I get rid of all the rats, \$5,000 plus expenses. If I fail, you owe me nothing."

She said, "If you get rid of ALL the rats, it'll be a miracle; so I think our \$5,000 will be safe right where it is."

The next day, Ms. Styne had a crew come to the store to completely empty the basement, as per Mr. Blank's directions. Everything was removed except the furnace, the hot-water heater, and an eight-foot-tall storage locker, perfect for observers to hide in. They next brought in and assembled a large metal water tank. It was circular, 6 feet tall, 12 feet in diameter, lined with waterproofed fabric and filled halfway with water. The basement ceiling was 20 feet high; and, directly over the water tank, the crew hung a large slab of putrid bacon. Six 10-foot-long wooden planks were then attached from the floor up to the rim of the water tank.

Mr. Blank, Ms. Styne, and Mr. Flynn, the store manager, would be inside the storage locker that night. There was a full moon, and small windows at ceiling level provided just enough light for them to be able to see what was happening while looking through the narrow ventilation slits in the locker doors. When the store closed for business at 10 p.m., the three were already safely and nervously waiting in the locker.

It was no more than a few minutes later when the first rat appeared. It was definitely the alpha male. He was as large as a beagle dog and appeared to weigh at least 15 pounds. He stared at the tank. His eyes, like two bright-red marbles, scanned the room for possible danger. His bulbous nose was twitching, smelling the pungency of the rotting bacon. He walked up one of the planks to the very top, gauging the distance he'd have to vault across to get his teeth into it. Being a very smart rat, he determined that he'd need a running start to be able to make it across that 6-foot gap. He turned around, walked back down the plank to the floor, stood up on his hind legs, and let out a long, very loud, high-pitched scream. Within seconds, hundreds of rats appeared, scurrying around wildly, jumping all over each other, and making quite a racket. Alpha male ran back up the plank at top speed, launched himself at the hanging pork belly, landed on it, and sank his teeth into the greasy flesh. The other rats, seeing what he'd done, copied his action as best they could. A few made it across the gap; the rest did not and fell into the water. Unable to scale the wall of the tank to escape, they quickly drowned. Alpha male, and the few others who had attached themselves to the smelly slab of bacon, gorged themselves, then found that they were unable to jump from the pork back to a plank or to the floor. Every one of them eventually dropped into the water and drowned as well. Every single rat had run up one or another of the planks, all in just a few minutes, expecting to land on the bacon like their leader. None survived.

The next morning, Mr. Blank and his crew fished all the dead rats out of the water tank, bagged them, threw them into a deep pit in the woods outside of town, then refilled the pit with lye and topsoil. A hose, attached to an outlet on the outside of the water tank at the bottom, allowed the water to be emptied into a drain in the basement floor. After dismantling and removing the tank from the building, Ms. Styne handed Mr. Blank a check for \$5,000 plus expenses. "You are a miracle-worker, Mr. Blank," she said. "No one is going to believe this story." Ω