

CHUCK,

THE TAILLESS RAT.

by C.M. Stassel

Very seldom does a person get the opportunity to witness something remarkable. I'm not saying I'm an authority on what qualifies as 'remarkable', but I'm sure most people go their entire lives without seeing anything truly great – whether it's sad, happy, weird, unexpected, beautiful – whatever it is, most people go through life and never see a darn thing. I used to be one of those people.

Even if a person is lucky enough to see something remarkable, it's rare that they would have the energy, let alone the frame of mind, to write down what they saw. Instead, witnesses of miraculous things so often choose to pass on their tale by word of mouth. And, as we all know, when stories are passed from one mouth to another details are lost, sequences are shuffled, characters are added and different conclusions, entirely, are reached. The story is at the mercy of the teller of the tale and, regardless of how fumbly or elegant or poised the speaker may be, the story is, no doubt, changed. For all these reasons I am writing for you now. My name is Arnold Patterson and I have witnessed something remarkable.

I will not trust my tale to the mouths of others for I do not want it changed in the slightest way; that's why I'm telling it now. However, it is important you know that I am not an author of any sort, nor am I an experienced storyteller. In fact, this is the first, and probably the only, story I've ever told. I will try to tell it simply, clearly and truthfully.

I'll start by telling you a little bit about myself – if, for nothing more, than to build the smallest amount of trust between you and I.

I was born in 1985 in a small farming town in Southern California near the Salton Sea. I'm the only child of Roger and Vivian Patterson. In the seventies, my father was drawn to the Salton Sea with hopes of making a name for himself in the booming resort town of Salton Bay. The Salton Sea thrived during the seventies and the early part of the eighties as yachting clubs and lake front houses sprang up left and right. But, the tides quickly turned as runoff from nearby farms spawned a deadly bacterial infection. The bacteria killed everything, including my father's dreams of creating a life for us at the Salton Sea.

He married my mother in 1979. They had a good marriage for a short while, but things quickly turned sour and, like a coward, he left. That's all I really know about him. I heard a while back he died in a boating accident on the Colorado River near Blythe, but I don't know for sure – I don't care. You see, there are good fathers and bad fathers in this world, it's simply luck of the draw which kind you get. Unfortunately, I got stuck with a bad one.

After my dad left, my Mom and I moved to Huntington, West Virginia to live with my Grandmother. Her name was Gillian; I called her Gigi. I loved growing up

with my Mom and Grandma. They're wonderful women and I'm lucky to have them in my life. We played cards and rode bicycles and swam in rivers. When I was eight years old, they taught me how to cook. I remember it like it was yesterday. Gigi and my Mom constantly bickering over which spices to add and what tomatoes to use. "That's too much salt, Mom," my mother would say. "There's no such thing as too much salt, Vivian. We're made of salt!" Gigi would respond, dramatically throwing her arms in the air. My favorite meal to cook was spaghetti and meatballs. We have a family sauce recipe, us Pattersons, and we're proud of it. It's been passed down for three generations – the secret ingredient is cinnamon. I know, it sounds strange, but trust me, it's delicious. Gigi claims it was her idea to add cinnamon, but my Mom is convinced it was my great, great, great Aunt Margaret who did it. It doesn't really **matter**, because, like Spaghetti and meat balls, Life was simple and I loved it.

I lived with them until I was eighteen. Then, I left for college in Maryland. I wasn't great in school or socially, I guess, and I don't know why I chose Maryland, but it was a good experience and I learned a few things – enough, at least, to land a sales job in New York City after graduation.

The job was for a small company called Goodell Frangrances – it was a deodorant company for women. I still work there today, but I'm pretty sure the company is going under. I haven't sold anything for weeks. It must have something to do with a man trying to sell women's deodorant, that's kind of a strange, awkward thing. I feel like women should sell deodorant to other women. Unless, of course, the man selling the deodorant uses the product himself. Unfortunately, I

don't use women's deodorant, which is a shame because I'd probably sell a lot more of the stuff.

This pretty much brings us to present day New York City, where I live. If you've lost interest...screw it, I've already started so I might as well finish. I don't know, maybe I should say this: I assure you with all the love in my heart and the bones in my body that the story I am about to tell you was witnessed by me and is absolutely true. Satisfied? No? Oh well, here it goes, any way.

The story takes place in New York City at the 110th Street subway station. This was the station I used to take to work every single morning. I have since moved and haven't been to One Ten in quite some time – that's what prompted me to get this story down on paper.

There was rarely anyone at One Ten, occasionally a passing bum or a lost drunkard, but most of the time it was just me, the trains, and the rats.

I'm not sure if you know much about New York City's subway system, so I'll share some of its endearing qualities with you. In both the summer and winter, it's miserably hot and unbearably stuffy. It's dirty with trash and garbage everywhere. It smells of strange, foreign odors – so foreign that I wouldn't even know how to describe them for you. I'd probably tell you it smells like cigarettes, vodka, and mold – something vile like that, but I don't really know how to describe the smell to you. That may have something to do with my less than stellar ability to perceive odors. Because of my allergies, I've never possessed powerful smelling organs, which, I suppose, can be a good thing in some situations, but not when it comes to telling a story. Continuing on, though, the subway is underground, which may seem obvious

but there are subways above ground, too. Namely, the “El” in Chicago, which is short for “elevated”. Finally, the most important thing to know about the subway system of New York is that it’s flooded with rats – and no station more so than One Ten.

There was a very distinct gang of rats that lived at One Ten. There were at least fifty of them, of all shapes and sizes. Some were small, others big, some gnarled, mangled, others with fine, smooth coats of fur. Some were missing eyes, others were missing ears, some were mothers, others were fathers, some brothers and the rest were sisters. It was a proper gang of New York City rats.

At One Ten, wires ran overhead – I suppose these wires ran at every platform but I don’t really know other platforms like I know One Ten. These wires served as a highway system for the rats. They would run, jump, and scurry across the high-flying wires. At first, I didn’t really notice them, but, as time went on, their balance and coordination caught my eye. Being a clutz, myself, I was captivated. Impressed. I was enthralled, enchanted – whatever it was, they were amazing little buggers.

After a year of waiting for trains at One Ten I started to recognize individual rats and, honestly, I gave them names. I considered leaving that part out for fear of embarrassment, but I realized that I’m not really embarrassed of it – and, I’ll probably be dead by the time you all read this, ~~any way~~. I guess I should introduce some of the rats of One Ten. There was the skinny rat with one eye that looked like he was wet all the time – his name was Frank. There was the light brown rat missing her right ear – I called her Lefty. There was a small rat that would hang

upside down

~~upside~~ on the wire by his tail; I called him Monk, which was short for Monkey.

There was a beautiful female rat with smooth fur white as snow. At night, when One Ten was empty and dark it looked like she was floating - I called her Ghost. A medium sized, black rat with incredibly large teeth and a temper, his name was Bites. The list went on and on. Bruno, Larry, Fatso, Peggy, Gertrude, Bozo, Clementine, Blackeye, Harold, Rocky, Sweetie. Tubby, Percy, Margaret, Sheryl, Kokua, Medusa...on and on the list went. I spent a lot of time waiting for trains at One Ten.

I began to understand how they operated and the culture they had created down there. I concluded they travelled the wires far and wide searching for food, but each evening returning home to One Ten. As time passed, I became very fond of the rats and I found myself excited to see them every morning and evening. At work, I daydreamed of the adventures their days' held and the celebrations that consumed their nights. Perhaps, I was bored with my own scheduled life, which was most likely the case, or, maybe they were just something interesting to pass the time; either way, I thought of the rats and their boundless freedoms often - too much, really. They could go anywhere and do anything - they didn't care about money or rent or dating. They ran wild in the subways eating whenever and whatever they found.

Humans have stereotyped rats as dirty, greedy, disgusting creatures living in sewers and subways eating our garbage and spreading diseases. If you were to call someone a "rat" they would surely be offended. I suppose the bubonic plague has played a big role in that, and it's not unwarranted, but it's not what I've seen. I don't find them filthy, greedy or disgusting. I would describe them as crafty, balanced creatures. I've never seen an animal display such balance, and it's not like I haven't

seen other animals. I've seen squirrels on tree limbs and possums on late night fences and raccoons on the sticky lips of overflowing trashcans. Mountain goats on mountains, lizards on the walls of desert caves, and even monkeys on jungle branches, but no display of balance has been more impressive than the high-wire act of the rats at One Ten.

The rat culture is simple – it's same as ours. The biggest rat is the one that's in charge, and for the rats of One Ten there was no question who that was – he was cunning, strong, dominant, and powerful. His name was Chuck. His eyes were of a greenish color and his fur was a light, peppered grey. He looked more like a vicious, hacked up rabbit than an actual rat, he was that big and that butchered. You'd think being so big, he'd be slow and heavy-footed, but far from it. He was easily - by leaps and bounds! - The most balanced and agile of all the rats.

If you were to see Chuck dancing along a wire, and you didn't know what you were looking for, you'd probably think that a reptilian pup or a vile feline had found its way into the subway and up onto the wire. I don't' really know what a reptilian pup is but I heard someone say it the other night, and from what I gather, it's ugly. Anyway, you would never think that such a large rat could move so gracefully and powerfully along such a skinny wire. I once saw Chuck jump from a moving train at full speed – he stuck the landing like that one-legged gymnast in the 1996 Olympics. I can't remember her name, but I can remember her haircut. I think it was Kerri something? It could have been Rebecca...it makes no difference, I still miss the nineties. But they're gone now, so back to Chuck. Another time, I saw him steal a hotdog from a grown man. He ran up the guy's pant leg, and the guy started

his

screaming and shakin' like hypothermia – then Chuck popped out of sleeve and snatched the frank right out of his hand. He ate like a king that night. I've even seen Chuck walk into a subway car and ride it as if he were a passenger. Nodding to fellow riders and casually making funny faces at staring babies. The point is, the wires were his home; his domain, and he was fearless and he was balanced. He was heavy, yet light on his toes. He was overbearing, yet danced daintily. He was savage, yet kind. Chuck was an uncommon beast.

Now, I've spent a lot of time pondering why Chuck possessed such poise and steadiness on the wires. It seems improbable, it seems inconceivable, much the same way it's unlikely to meet a portly ballerina - it just doesn't make sense. But, after many hours of observation, and even more theories entertained and, later, debunked, I've come up with an explanation – and it's very simple. The balance of a rat lies solely in the size and coordination of its tail. Rats use their tails the same way a tightrope walker uses a long, thin pole to maneuver across a wire. Or, if there is no pole involved, it is the same way that we, as humans, extend our arms to both sides to gain a steadier grasp on a balancing task. Rats use their tails to balance themselves, and Chuck was blessed with a mountainous tail. It was mighty and massive – an incredible instrument that allowed him to do miraculous things on the wire. Without a tail, a rat was nothing, destined to a grounded and lonely life.

As Chuck would race down the narrow wires his tail would lift in the air, and he would move it very deliberately in a circular motion, correcting his movements ever so slightly in either direction. Chuck was blessed with masterly ~~hand-eye-tail~~ **paw-eye-tail** coordination, and because of it he was able to pull off the most sensational balancing

stunts I've ever seen. I've watched Chuck in fights many times; usually with rats from other places – a turf war kind of thing. He never lost, never even came close to losing. He was bigger but that's not why he always won. He won because he was more balanced. He was like Muhammed Ali – a big, ol' boy with some crazy footwork. "You're too ugly to fight me! Look at you, you can't dance like I can dance! Trippin' over your own feet, goddamn I'm so sweet! To your mother you will retreat!" Chuck would say, taunting his opponents - I swear I've witnessed it. And with a poised paw, he would wave them on, egging them to attack. Like a ninja, never forcing the action, waiting for his opportunity to strike. Calm and balanced, he was deadly - the deadliest rat the underworld had ever seen.

Now, that you have some sort of understanding of the rats at One Ten, and you've, at least mildly, been introduced to their culture and Chuck, it is the perfect time to do this...

On a pleasant spring morning in April, I woke up feeling unusually happy. Perhaps, it was the dreams that I'd dreamt or, maybe, I had classically slept like a rock – the answer, we will never truly know. Sometimes a person simply wakes up feeling happy. If I knew the secret to this feeling, and I could replicate it regularly, I'm sure I'd be a much happier man - if not, wealthier and better rested.

On that morning in April, while I read the paper and drank a cup of mediocre coffee, eating runny eggs and hard, buttered toast, I thought of Chuck and the rats. I expected to have a great day, as one usually does after a great night of rest. This, however, would not be the case. My day was the exact opposite of great – it was rotten.

I smiled my way down the steps to One Ten. I was dressed in my favorite red tie, I know because I remember wishing I wasn't dressed so nicely on such a horrible day. No one wants to witness a tragedy in their favorite suit, wearing their favorite tie – but, that's how it happened for me.

I knew something was strange immediately. Nearly half the rats were sitting on the wire looking down at the tracks. They were starkly serious compared to their usual chaotic routine of running, scurrying and jumping. I, then, looked down to see Chuck and two other rats. I had only seen them down on the tracks like that one or two other times, and it was only to scavenge food. This time, however, it wasn't. One of the young, newly born rats had fallen to its death. Chuck and the two others crowded around the fallen child. I couldn't tell what they were doing exactly, but it looked as if they were praying. Suddenly, the glowing eyes of the train turned the corner, heading straight for them. The two other rats scrambled to safety, leaving Chuck with the deceased. He started to run, but almost immediately turned back for the child. He picked it up and ran for it. I've never seen a rat slip, trip, or misstep, so I breathed a sigh of relief as I saw him running to safety. I was certain they would make it - but I must have jinxed him because just as the thought entered my head, Chuck tripped over an unseen rock and fell to his stomach dropping the baby. He fiercely moved to correct his mistake, picking it up and frantically continuing, but the train was moving too fast. He managed to get the most of his body out of harm's way, but his tail was laid out perfectly on the rail, readied for the metal wheel of the train to slice through it like the hot blade of a guillotine. Sssss! It hissed as it went through. I didn't get on that train. I couldn't.

The train slowly rolled away, Chuck had vanished. His severed, bloody tail lay lifeless on the tracks. Overhead, the rats gazed searchingly for their fallen leader. Shoulders shrunken, head hung low, Chuck finally appeared out of the darkness. He hesitantly paced forward to examine the tragic scene. The tail no longer belonged to him. It was like watching an all-star basketball player have his shooting hand chopped off at the wrist – achingly forced to look at his former glory sitting there dead on the ground. He looked up to his fellow rats, their eyes filled sadness and uncertainty. As I said before, a rat without a tail is nothing at all. Chuck was no longer just ‘Chuck’. Now, he was Chuck, the tailless rat. After that day, the rats of One Ten didn’t dare come down off the wires. Chuck was doomed to a sad, lonely, tailless, grounded existence. He lost his tail and with it, went his balance, his courage, and his life up on the wires. I went to work that day – late - and I didn’t do a thing. I thought to myself over and over again, “If Chuck could fall like that, then I, too, am surely doomed.”

Chuck spent most of his days out of sight, most likely crying, depressed – that’s what I would do. The rats spent a great deal of time looking down, trying to spot Chuck. They were so close, but now, with no confidence, no balance – no tail – they were worlds apart.

Three weeks passed, Chuck barely moved from the shadows, and I never once woke up happy. I dreamt of ways to help Chuck find his balance, to regain his courage. Fantastic thoughts of robotic tails usurped my usually dull dreams, but they were just dreams. I was a deodorant salesman, and a bad one, at that – I couldn’t create a robotic tail, and even if I could, how was I supposed to catch

Chuck? Run around on the tracks chasing him? “Come here, Chuck! Come here, Chuck. I just want to help! I made a robotic tail for you,” I’d say stumbling around in the dark, only to meet the same fate as he – but with no tail dangling from my backside, it’d most likely be an arm or a leg or worse. It was impossible. I admit I am not the most steadfast, intelligent or capable of humans, but, with Chuck tailless and stranded below the wires, those qualities only seemed to magnify.

One month passed, and, on a bland day, something remarkable happened. It was a normal morning when I arrived at One Ten. As they always did, the rats were running furiously on the wires. Chuck, motionless on the ground. All was calm below ground, but, in a split second, One Ten transformed into a theatre of war. A crow, beautifully black and impossibly mean, stumbled into the subway. Now, let me be clear, this was unusual. You’d be hard pressed to find another person who has seen a crow in the subways of New York City. I strongly feel this was the first time it had ever happened – and, although, it may have been the first time, it definitely was not an accident. It was completely unlikely the crow whimsically ~~wondered~~ **wandered** underground to One Ten where a large group of rats happened to live. No, no, no. With utmost precision and a hefty appetite for rat, that crow meticulously plotted his arrival. You could hear the dark organs blowing as he fluttered into the scene.

Crows are amazingly nasty birds. They are intelligent. Fierce. Aggressive. Territorial. Strong. And masterful fliers. At any given moment, they’re the meanest bird in the sky and this crow was especially mean – a twisted, sick kind of mean. As it is, Crows and rats are natural enemies, it’s been this way for years. They are the reason rats live in subways and sewers – they drove them down there thousands of

year ago. The crows stayed above ground and the rats ruled below. One Ten had been a safe haven, a home, but, now, it had been invaded.

The crow let out a deafening scream and every single rat froze with terror. The scream meant one thing – death. The rats of One Ten tore into frenzy. One rat ran this way, another that way - it was bedlam. Every rat for itself. The crow circled the wires, wind whipping through its black feathers. It banked sharply left and then bounced back right. It dived, swooped, and pitched, and as chaos consumed the rats, their squeals and cries rang out. The crow continued to circle waiting for his moment to strike. I yelled at the crow, “Hey! Get outta here!” but it didn’t matter. I tried to throw an aluminum can at it, but I missed. All I could do was watch – or, at least, that’s what I pretend to believe. I probably could have done more, but at that moment, I couldn’t do a thing. I had to let it unfold naturally. I wanted...I had to see what the rats would do...and I guess that’s all right. It was something I couldn’t disrupt. It had to happen. It was nature. Underground, soggy, soiled, mean city nature – and I was the spectator. I was the soldier who the General told to run. “Tell them our story,” he would say, blood dripping down his battered face. So that’s what I’m doing; I’m telling their story.

In the mayhem, one of the rats lost its balance and slipped. In a desperate attempt, it latched its tail onto the wire, dangling like a worm on a hook. The rat was brown and skinny and she was missing her right ear – it was Lefty. The crow orbited Lefty, his black eyes locked. She screamed for help, but the others had all gone. She hung there, alone, awaiting her doom. She squirmed and wriggled as the crow stalked his target, gliding slowly, cruelly.

The crow's wings shifted through the damp air, banking hard. A piercing screech echoed through the subway as he made his final, murderous approach. I knew it was all over and I wanted to look away, I should have, but I couldn't. I needed to see it. I had to know how it would end. Paralyzed, I stood there watching. The crow was two feet away, when, suddenly, Chuck, the tailless rat, leapt through the air like a Roman gladiator. Chuck and the crow collided, plummeting like rocks, twisting and turning over one another, until CRACK! Chuck landed on the crow, snapping its wing at the bone. Blood splattered like a whipping paintbrush. The tailless rat, covered in blood, sprinted away from the brawling scene. The crow rolled and rambled in pain, finally getting to its feet, it limped away, defeated and broken. Humbled, darkness consumed the dying bird and it was gone.

I looked up to see Chuck, the tailless rat, sitting proudly, once more, on the wire, surrounded by the rats of One Ten. He found his balance, and it wasn't in his tail.

I have to admit, crazed with happiness, and walking up and down One Ten with my arms thrown stiffly in the air, I yelled, "Chuck the tailless rat! The tailless rat king! The tailless rat king lives! CHUCK THE TAILLESS RAT KING LIVES!" over and over again. I couldn't believe what I had just seen. The air was buzzing with excitement. The rats were cheering, I was yelling – the crow had been defeated and Chuck was back on the wires. I came to the end of the platform, I could see the trail of droplets of blood leading out of One Ten and into the darkness. The sight was eerie and I dropped my arms, wondering if this was all really happening. It was strange being in a subway celebrating the death of a crow with a bunch of rats – was

this who I was? I guess, because I liked it. At that moment, it was where I wanted to be. As justifications clouded my head, I heard something coming from the darkness. The sound was difficult to make out, but it sounded like the air was moving. WOOSH. WOOH. WAH. Then, we all heard it, CACKAW! Thirty crows stormed out of the darkness. It was a full on assault.

They attacked viciously, slaying rats with ruthless excitement. Monk was stabbed in the back. A beak plunged into the gut of Ghost, spotting her white coat red. Lefty tried to jump from wire to wire but was hit midair, and fell to her death. Bites fought bravely, clawing at the face of a crow, but he took a faulty step and fell. Before he could hit the tracks, he was picked apart by multiple crows, his tail all that was left. Bozo managed to scratch the eye of a crow, and it screamed in agony as it retreated. Larry and Blackeye teamed up on one of the larger birds. Each grabbed hold of one of its wings, feathers flying as the scuffle intensified; the three of them dropped to the ground. The crow survived the fall but not the rats – it hobbled away, wingless, doomed. There was one crow, in particular, that was violent and nasty. I saw it rip three rats to pieces within seconds. It was a massive bird, with skinny, wiry wings and sickly feathers. Its distorted screech was vile and sent chills up my spine. “Ahhhh!” I howled as I hurled my briefcase at the devil bird, unable to quietly watch the war any longer. It squawked, barely dodging my blow. Then, it dived towards me, taking a swing at my face. I ducked the attack and as it turned to make another pass - I swear - Chuck leapt through the air and landed on the bird’s back. He rode the crow as it spittered and spattered like a smoking fighter jet, all the while clawing at his head and eyes. The crow, flustered, crashed head on into

the wall smashing its skull – Chuck was able to leap from the bird and onto a wire just before impact.

The battle raged on, casualties building on each side. I've never seen anything like it. Dead crows and rats scattered throughout One Ten. Blood stains covered the walls, feathers, fur and tails littered the tracks. Then, just as quickly as it began, it stopped. One crow and one rat remained. The crow was young and small, clearly afraid. He circled Chuck, the lone rat, and, for a moment, thought about an attack, but, seeing Chuck's eyes, his face covered in blood, scarred & tailless, he thought better of it and retreated. One last screech echoed through the subway. Chuck stood on the wire, alone, once again – but, this time, instead of looking up, he was looking down at the fallen rats.

It was a massacre. In one ~~fall~~^{fell} swoop, the rats of One Ten had been decimated. I sat there, shocked, numb, sad – I didn't know what to do, so I just sat. The platform was now a graveyard – Chuck, the tailless rat king, the lone survivor and the keeper.

Shortly thereafter I moved to West Village. I haven't been back to One Ten, but I know, or I hope, that Chuck the tailless rat is still up on the wires. A rat without a tail is, after all, still a rat.

The train's slowing, now, and it's my stop, the sign reads "1-1-0" ...I'm going to see an old friend. His name is Chuck, the tailless rat king of One Ten.

Sincerely,

AP

Epilogue:

Chuck, the tailless rat, lives.