

A grayscale portrait of a man with dark, wavy hair, wearing a dark jacket over a white shirt and a patterned scarf. The image is faded and serves as a background for the title.

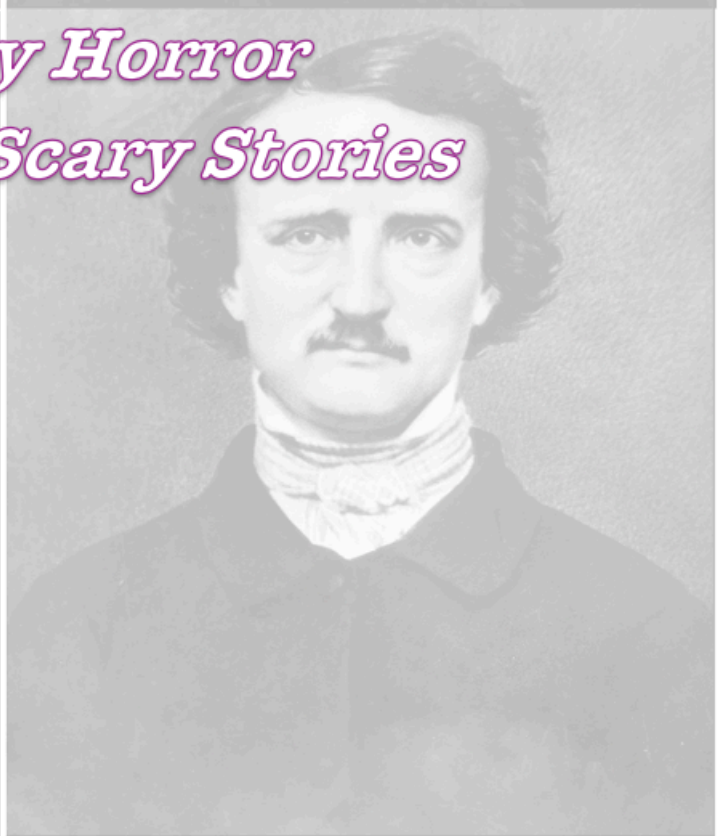
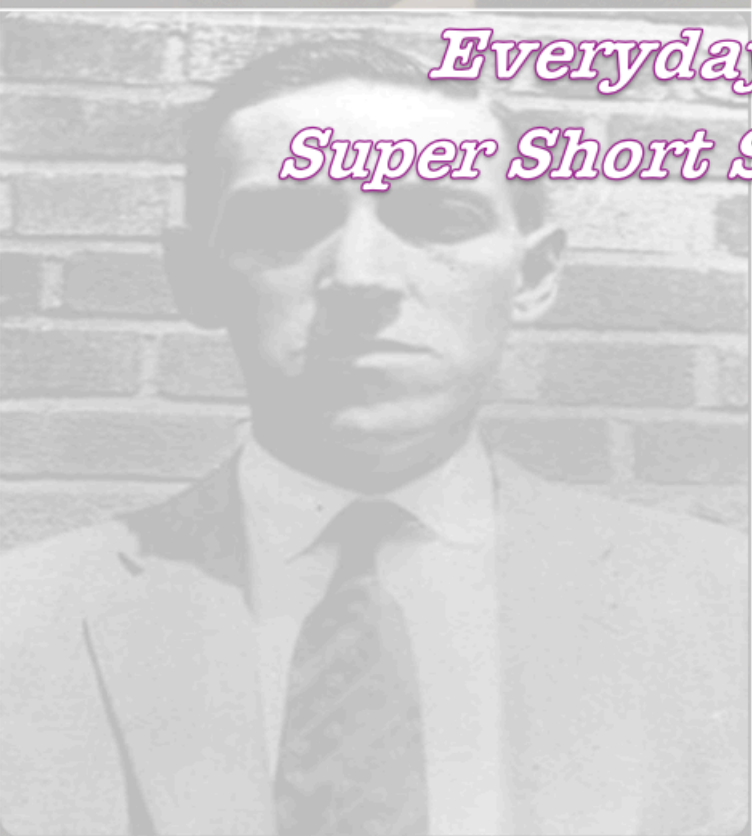
NEW LEAF

A grayscale portrait of a man with light-colored hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt and a dark bow tie. The image is faded and serves as a background for the title.

THE ENGLISH COOPERATIVE REVIEW

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*Everyday Horror
Super Short Scary Stories*



Preface to "Everyday Horror"

By MC Barnes

Everyday Horror is a collection born from a simple yet intriguing writing exercise I devised for my college students during Halloween. The assignment was straightforward: craft a super short horror story, no longer than 500 words, that emulated either the cosmic horror trope made famous by H.P. Lovecraft or the iceberg theory as expressed by Edgar Allan Poe or Ernest Hemingway. Over the years, I have always modeled what I teach, producing my own stories alongside my students. These tales often centered on the everyday experiences of living in Daytona Beach by the ocean, weaving the mundane with the macabre.

With the advent of artificial intelligence, the landscape of composition has dramatically transformed. Students today can now produce collections with a unifying theme, facilitated by the enhanced capabilities of AI, making the writing process both more efficient and prolific. This collection, **Everyday Horror**, serves as my model for the students.

The process to generate these stories and their accompanying cover art was as innovative as it was rigorous. The goal was never to let the AI, in this case, ChatGPT, control the narrative but rather to utilize it as an editor. The philosophy of composition was to view the writer more as a director than an author, more as a conductor than a musician. Prompts were specific, often nearly as long as the final 500-word story. While stories could be modified and tweaked within ChatGPT, detailed word-by-word editing was meticulously done in Microsoft Word.

Why, you might ask, go through such an intensive procedure and still use AI? Why not just write it all out oneself? The simplest answer is that AI synthesizes narrative elements remarkably well, making judgments regarding content and style that are incredibly helpful. There is also an element of magic in the process, akin to throwing dice or drawing cards.

The cover art for each story was generated by instructing the AI to select elements from the narratives. The facts of the stories are true, though they still require interpretation. This collection is a testament to the evolving nature of writing and storytelling, blending traditional techniques with modern technology to create something unique and engaging. The stories were created to be standalone, though a reader might see a unity that suggests one story or even dream.

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Good Vibes from Bad Gods

“The Colour out of Space,” Lovecraft (model)

<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/cs.aspx>

The Spanish Revival house stood majestic and haunting, its green roof tiles catching the relentless Florida sun. Daytona Beach shimmered with heat in late June, the air thick and oppressive. I, an English professor on summer break, had taken on the Sisyphean task of restoring this aging relic, and today’s challenge involved glazing a window on the second floor, about 25 feet high.

The previous night, unable to sleep, I indulged in a horror movie marathon, culminating with *The Beyond*. Its chilling scenes left an indelible mark. Two deaths from high falls—one from scaffolding, the other from a library ladder—seemed sinisterly prescient. Both houses, mine and the film's haunted hotel, were built in the 1920s in the South, with similar tile roofs. The film's plot about a woman renovating a haunted hotel only deepened my unease as I embarked on my own restoration project.

Morning arrived with a sweltering fervor, the air already buzzing with humidity and the drone of insects. As I dressed, my fingers brushed against my good luck charm necklace, a product of a stone polishing activity I did with the boys years ago. It had always been a source of comfort. But as I pulled it over my head, the chain snapped, the charm falling between my feet with a soft clink. The broken necklace seemed to reinforce the horror movie omens from the previous night, deepening my sense of foreboding.

My son, Cooper, had sprayed the wasp nests, but their inhabitants were none too pleased, adding another layer of anxiety to my endeavor. The ladder, an old, rickety beast, stood by the house, mocking me with its silent potential for disaster. From the window, the Atlantic Ocean's waves could be seen, a constant reminder of *The Beyond's* ominous ending: "And you will face the sea of darkness and all therein that may be explored."

As I set up the ladder, images of Liza from "The Beyond" flashed through my mind. Would I fall and be eaten by insects, paralyzed and unable to move like the librarian? Would Emily, the blind guide to Hell, appear in the window and scare me off the ladder? Would the window shatter, with shards slicing my face like the hospital orderly? These thoughts ran through my mind, each more terrifying than the last.

I began my ascent, each step resonating with echoes of last night's film. Sweat trickled down my back as I reached the top, my fingers trembling with the remembered images of plummeting bodies. The wasps buzzed around, agitated, their erratic flight patterns mirroring my scattered thoughts.

After a few futile attempts, the ladder slipped each time, the precarious angle refusing to hold. My mind raced, replaying the movie scenes, the omens screaming louder with each failure. An hour passed in this Sisyphean struggle, my frustration mounting with the temperature.

Then, in a moment of clarity, I remembered. Ten years earlier, I had faced a similar challenge with a ladder and this very window. The memory surfaced like a forgotten spell. The ladder needed to be set further from the house, wedged between the rafters to prevent sliding.

Realization dawned, not as a bolt of terror, but as a whisper of caution from the dark gods. They were not foretelling my fall; they were guiding me to avoid it. Their message was not of doom but of vigilance. The omens were warnings, not curses.

I adjusted the ladder, carefully wedging it between the rafters, securing it with meticulous precision. The wasps seemed to sense my newfound determination and retreated, leaving me to my task.

As I climbed once more, the ladder held firm, a sturdy bridge between the earth and the precarious heights. I completed the glazing with steady hands, each stroke of the brush a defiance of the foreboding whispers.

The gods of old, the harbingers of dread, had not sought my demise. They had merely cautioned me, their dark vibes a reminder of the fragility of life and the necessity of caution. I descended, the task complete, feeling a strange sense of camaraderie with the unseen entities. They had spoken, and I had listened.

And thus, in the oppressive heat of a Florida summer, amidst the buzzing of wasps and the echoes of a horror movie, I learned that even bad gods can send good vibes.

Word Count: 498

The Beyond (1981)

[The Beyond 1981 With Eng Sub - video Dailymotion](#)



World's Most Dangerous Beach

Old Man and the Sea, Hemingway (model)

<https://www.arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/oldmansea.pdf>

The sun dipped low over Daytona Beach. The water glowed warm. The beach was beautiful, but I knew its dangers. Volusia County was notorious. It was the shark bite and lightning capital of the world. A girl had lost her hand and leg in a shark attack in Walton Beach. It added to the fear.

As a kid in New Jersey, I never had luck fishing. My dad and I caught only eels and dogfish in the murky water. When I moved to Florida, I decided to try fishing again. I read "Moon

Up/Moon Down," which said to follow the moon's cycles. For me, that meant going at low tide. I would walk out past the first sandbar and cast off it. Since then, I always caught fish. Some were monsters from the deep.

That evening, I hoped to catch something for dinner. Maybe a whiting or a pompano. The sky rumbled as I cast my line into the surf. Minutes later, the rod bent under the weight of something big. A thrill shot through me. This was going to be a good catch. My heart raced. I waded into the water, now up to my chin. Each step felt like moving through a thick fog of dread.

The beach was empty. Usually, people watched for any fish being reeled in. Today, no one was around. I felt isolated. The vastness of the sea made me feel small and vulnerable. As I dragged my catch back to shore, excitement turned to fear. What if it was a shark? What if it was a barracuda? Worse, what if a predator followed my catch and came for me?

The struggle on the line suggested a big catch. My ten-foot surf rod was bowed like a bowstring. The reel groaned in protest. The beautiful beach seemed menacing now. The water was darker and more ominous.

Slowly, a dark shape appeared. It glided towards the shore. My two boys stood at the edge of the water. Their eyes were wide with fear and excitement. The shape became clear. It was a stingray, about the size of an extra-large pizza. It thrashed against the line. Its black body was a stark contrast to the shimmering water.

Later, at the bait and tackle shop, I described the event. I thought I had caught a skate. The staff listened, then laughed. "Everyone comes in here saying they caught a stingray when it's a skate. You're the first to catch a stingray and call it a skate. If it had a stinger, it's a stingray. The same kind that killed Steve Irwin."

My boys brought me a dive knife. I tried to remove the hook. The stingray swung its barbed tail at me. I cut the line instead. I left the hook in its mouth. I feared I had made an enemy in the deep.

I stood on the shore. I watched the stingray disappear into the water. I felt relief and unease. The beautiful beach had shown its dangerous side. I knew there were more threats beneath the surface. Somewhere out there, a stingray swam with a hook in its mouth. It was a reminder of how perilous the sea could be.

Word count: 491



The Bridges Are Closed

“Snows of Kilimanjaro,” *Hemingway* (model)

<https://pdcrodas.webs.ull.es/naturalismo/HemingwayTheSnowsOfKilimanjaro.pdf>

The authorities announced a category three hurricane was approaching Daytona Beach. My wife Liz and our boys, Cooper and Wesley, evacuated. I decided to stay and protect our old Spanish style house that leaked. We had weathered about ten hurricanes, but this one was supposed to be a direct hit.

I prepared. Everyone knows the protocols. Stay inside, get ice, beer, snacks, flashlights. Most importantly, avoid accidents because no one will come to help. We live beachside, a stone's throw from the shore, right off A1A.

A responsible survivor, the first thing I did was the dishes, assuming the water might shut off soon. The sink was full of grey, nasty water. I reached in, thinking about the storm, and a brand-new German paring knife stuck up from a dirty glass. It cut my finger to the bone. Blood spurted across the recently painted white backsplash like an 80s slasher movie.

In the middle of the chaos, two fellow resisters to the evacuation appeared at the back door. One was a former Marine. He did a field dressing with duct tape, saying I wouldn't bleed out, but the bridges were closed anyway, so no way to get stitches.

I spent the next three days with no power, fighting the hurricane and worrying about the wound. Would it get infected? Would it start bleeding again? The house creaked and groaned. I patched leaks and barricaded windows, the wind howling like a banshee.

At night, lying in bed, I worried about infection. It seemed a waste of life to die from a kitchen accident. The storm raged outside, and I thought about the chaos a hurricane brings. One mistake, one cut, and everything spirals.

By the time I made it to an emergency shelter, a doctor looked at the cut and said there was nothing to do now. "You'll just have a nice scar," he said. I survived, but the experience left me with a new respect for the chaotic force of a hurricane and how fragile our control over life really is.

The bridges were closed. The storm passed. But the scar remains, a reminder of the fine line between safety and chaos, life and death. It's odd that I can't remember the name of the hurricane, even though I can see the scar. Maybe hurricanes are like old girlfriends—you only remember the drama and the effects.

(Word count: 401)



Shooting a Possum

Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" (model)

<https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/shooting-an-elephant/>

In the sweltering heat of a Florida afternoon, I sat in my yard grading a stack of poorly written essays. The humidity clung to me like a second skin, and the chirping of cicadas formed a relentless symphony. Suddenly, my concentration was shattered by an unsettling sight just fifteen feet away: two possums mating in the daylight. Their presence, so brazen and bold, was a stark

contrast to their nocturnal nature, and it struck me that my overgrown, tropical yard had become far too familiar to these creatures.

The male possum, older and grayer, with nasty, sharp teeth and drooling, thrust in a perverse fashion that made me think of a Bosch painting, a vision straight out of hell. The female, younger and less marked by time, seemed almost submissive to his grotesque advances. Disgusted and disturbed, I decided to act.

I went inside and retrieved my pellet gun, loading it with non-lethal target pellets. The idea was to scare them off, a humane solution to a grotesque problem. I took aim and fired at the male. The pellet struck, but he didn't miss a beat. I fired again, and again, with no effect. Frustrated, I returned to the house and swapped the pellets for hunting ones—gold-plated, aluminum, and pointed for penetration.

This time, the male possum flinched but continued his vile act. I shifted my aim to the female. The first shot hit, and she stumbled away, blood streaming from the wound, and collapsed among the tall sabal palms. The mood shifted from aggression to distress, her suffering palpable. My attempts to end her misery only worsened it, each shot spilling more blood without delivering the fatal blow.

Desperation led me back inside for the family heirloom—a 16-gauge shotgun known as the Sweet 16. Not one to hunt, I was aware of the legal risks of discharging a firearm within city limits. I opened a window in the pool room, pointed the gun out, plugged my good ear with a cotton ball, and fired. The blast hurled the possum across the yard, along with five or six baby possums that had been hidden beneath her. It was another scene from a Bosch nightmare.

The old male possum scurried up a palm tree, vanishing into the canopy. At that moment, my pregnant wife pulled into the driveway. I intercepted her, preventing her from witnessing the carnage. Later, I explained what had transpired, leaving out the most grotesque details.

That night, I went to dispose of the body, but it had already been dragged away by some predator—perhaps the old male possum, a stray dog, or a large hawk. Instead, I found one surviving baby possum staring up at the moon, its eyes surprisingly cute and innocent. It would not survive without its mother, I knew. For a moment, I considered ending its suffering but then left it to the yard creatures.

As I walked back to the house, I couldn't shake the thought: I had set out to rid my yard of pests, yet it was I who felt monstrous. Just as Orwell in Burma had realized his lack of control, I stood there, haunted by the realization that perhaps the true pest was me.



True Fear

Philosophy of Composition, Poe (model)

<http://www.lem.seed.pr.gov.br/arquivos/File/livrosliteraturaingles/filosofiadacomposicao.pdf>

What is fear? While many indulge in horror movies, savoring the thrill, does anyone truly relish the sensation of being afraid? As an aficionado of horror films, I must confess that the thrill of fear is not something I seek. Many people may never have experienced true fear—the kind that triggers primal self-preservation instincts.

Here's an anecdote of true fear. When I first bought my house in Florida, I was aware of its problems: asbestos, a leaky roof, an overgrown tropical yard, and a boiler in the basement that looked like it belonged in a WWII submarine. These issues deterred many buyers, but my experience as a framer and plumber during college gave me the confidence to tackle these challenges without financial ruin. The roof was covered in Ludowici tiles, the same used on the Empire State Building and in Colonial Williamsburg. Having spent time in Japan admiring their tile-roofed temples, I saw repairing this roof as a karmic destiny.

The first time I climbed onto the roof, I used a 28-foot extension ladder. Upon inspection, I prepared to descend. Reaching for the top rung, which was about a foot above the roofline, I peered over the edge and saw the ground 25 feet below. My heart began to pound. Finding this odd, I sat back to compose myself. After five minutes of staring at the distant ocean, I tried again, only for my body and soul's instinctive mechanisms to warn me of the folly of my actions.

Sitting on the roof, images of past job site injuries flashed through my mind—a worker breaking an elbow and ribs, another impaled by a nail after grabbing a stud to stop a fall. After ten minutes of contemplating whether I would have to try again or be airlifted off the roof, my wife came out of the laundry room. With great effort, she managed to pull the ladder up three rungs, enabling me to descend.

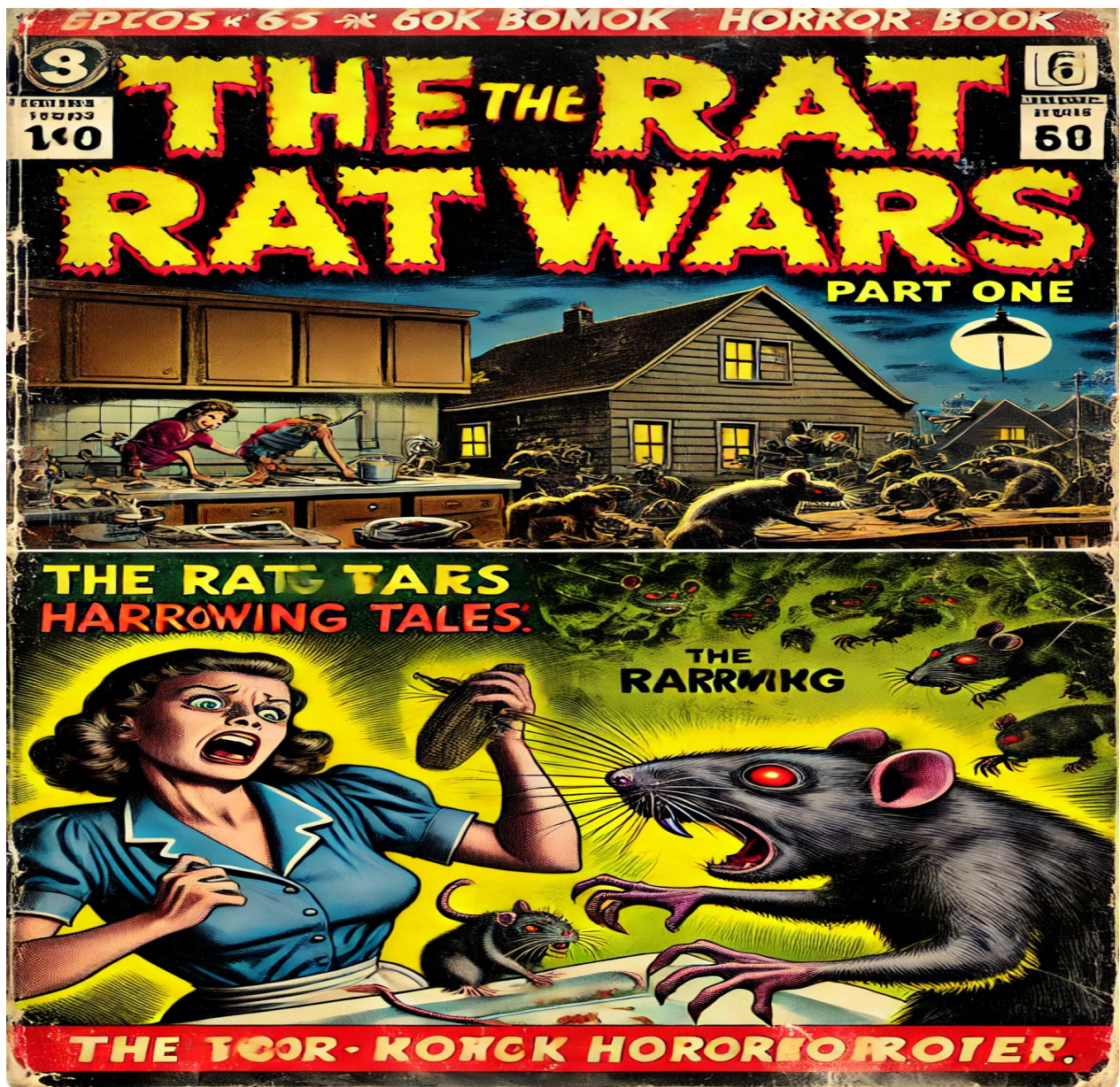
The moral of this story is simple: no one likes fear. Horror is a tease; it isn't the real thing. The real thing would make you run and never return. As one carpenter put it, "Will framing houses make you a man? Maybe, but it'll also make you cry like a baby."

True fear is not the carefully crafted suspense of a horror film or the chilling thrill of a ghost story. It is the raw, instinctive terror that grips you when your survival is at stake. This primal fear is not something to be enjoyed but something to be respected. It reminds us of our vulnerability and the thin veneer of safety that our everyday lives provide.

In the words of Poe, the experience of fear is not merely an emotional reaction but a profound encounter with the unknown. It strips away our pretensions and lays bare the fragility of human existence. Horror, then, is not just a genre but a mirror reflecting the deepest anxieties of the human soul. It is a testament to the power of the unknown and the uncontrollable forces that lurk just beyond the edges of our perception.

In conclusion, horror teases us with the semblance of fear, but true fear is a raw, unfiltered confrontation with the precariousness of life itself. It is a reminder that, despite our best efforts to control our surroundings, there are forces beyond our understanding and control. This is the essence of true fear, and it is something that no horror movie can ever fully replicate.

(Word count: 538)



The Rat Wars: Part One

Rats in the Walls, Lovecraft (model)

<https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/rw.aspx>

I had little experience with rats until I moved to Florida. My first encounter was during a renovation project in Columbia, SC. One day, a graduate student renting a room from me, Tonya, ran screaming from the pantry. She claimed a rat surfaced from the toilet. I investigated and saw the rat on the pantry shelf, chewing plastic. When I swung at it, the rat leaped back into the toilet. The next day, I called an exterminator.

Tonya came to me saying a black man was at the front door, speaking a dialect she couldn't understand. The "Rat Man" explained that rats lived in the sewer system in Shandon because it was built long ago. They come up through the pipes, and this one was sharpening his teeth on plastic. He spoke a coastal dialect, Gullah, that was thick and hard to interpret. He imparted wisdom of rat catching: they do like cheese and peanut butter, but vanilla on a cotton ball is superior. He said they can't see well, so they follow walls and use their whiskers like a blind person's cane. If you find their paths, you trap them there.

In Florida, locals warned us that the 30 or 40 mature sabal palms on our property would attract roof rats. Roof rats breed all year but breeding peaks in the spring and fall. A female roof rat can have up to five litters per year, with each litter containing 5–8 pups. Roof rat pups can become reproductive as early as 2–3 months old, so a single mating pair can produce a colony of over 1,800 rats in a year.

Our first sighting was during a dinner party when a guest noted humorously that two or three rats were climbing up a pipe attached to the side of the house. Where were they going? We recently upgraded from window units to central air, and the HVAC workers cut a hole in the fascia to accommodate their water discharge pipe. The hole was too large, inviting the rats living in the palms. We told ourselves for months that the scraping noises coming from the attic and walls at night were merely playful squirrels, but the noises grew in intensity and frequency, especially when one would hit a glue trap and drag it across the wooden floor for hours.

I bought an air rifle to address the obvious infestation. I marked six notches in the stock during the first rat war. Glue and poison traps caught three more. I remember pulling one from the attic, which had a narrow access portal. The sickly-sweet smell required a bandana heavy with cologne to mask the stench. I remember seeing the yellow pus emitting from its skull and how the tail brushed my face when I swept the foot-long rat into the garbage bag.

Perhaps the most harrowing event was when a rat breached our living space and was going up the stairs into my office, eating lettuce intended for a Russian tortoise. We saw the partially eaten lettuce on our bedroom floor and recognized a rat was passing our bed at night. I remembered the Rat Man's advice and filled the staircase chokepoint with glue traps.

That night, we heard a panicked rat shriek and a loud death struggle. We sprang from bed and ran to the stairs. There, a large roof rat was dragging a glue trap toward the kitchen. I went for the air rifle, but my wife, Liz, took pursuit. When the rat lunged for the dark void between the dishwasher and countertop, the trap prevented it from disappearing. Its tail and rear end were exposed. To my shock, Liz grabbed the rat by the tail. The two engaged in a violent tug-o-war until the rat lost, and she hurled it into the yard, whereupon I shot it.

If one rat could cause such mayhem, imagine what a colony could do in a year. Yet, the most frightening aspect was my wife's frenzied response to this horrific intrusion. Thus ended the first rat war. We still hear a solitary rat (we assume) in the wall downstairs behind the toilet in the guest bathroom. I hope it doesn't find a mate and settle down.

Word Count: 549



Brushes with Death

The Killers, Hemingway (model)

<https://www.sfponline.org/Uploads/372/The%20Killers.pdf>

My mother worried about my adventures in Asia. She wanted me to come home. I told her about the time I stood on a reef in the Philippines, surrounded by hundreds of black-and-white catfish. They were beautiful. Later, on the flight home, I read in National Geographic that they were bumblebee catfish, and they were poisonous. In Palawan, with no hospital nearby, that could have been deadly.

I bribed an outrigger captain to take me through a typhoon across the Batangas Channel. I needed to take the GRE on Luzon the next morning. A man in Bangkok almost got me and a friend to visit some special temple alone across the river. I was in the Bloody May protest crackdown. I almost died rewiring a Sawzall, and once a can of vaporized WD40 hit a table saw and a Bic lighter. But the closest call was in the bathtub.

I was working on the tile roof with a storm approaching. I'd been caught in storms before, and I cursed the rain god. Thunder rumbled, and I knew it was too dangerous. I went inside to take a bath for my sore muscles. From the tub, I could see the aluminum ladder through a window. I counted the seconds between lightning flashes and thunderclaps to see how far away the storm was. Volusia County is the lightning capital of the world. People get struck on the beach, playing golf, or on roofs. One roofer recently died; his sneakers were found twenty feet away.

A flash lit the hallway, and I thought the ladder had been struck. I flung myself from the tub, water spraying the walls. I saw nothing, felt nothing. I forgot about it. Later, that night, Liz woke me. She heard running water. I said it was impossible. We went to the basement door and opened it. Water was rushing from the coquina wall along the staircase. I turned off the water main and cut a hole in the wall the next day. Inside was an eroded pit of sand with the house's water main exposed. The coupling connecting the house pipe to the street pipe was fused like it had been arc welded.

We figured the lightning hit the ladder, ran into the wet grass, and into the house through the metal piping. The slow leak in the pipe allowed it to ground into the soil instead of running up into the bathtub.

As my mother and I tried to calculate how many lives I had left as a cat, she insisted we include the fever I had as a baby that resulted in deafness in one ear. I told her that one didn't count because I couldn't remember it. We laughed, but I knew she still worried.

Word Count: 488