

GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

Two Sadnesses

Perhaps *the* hot young writer of the 1970s, George Alec Effinger has subsequently maintained a reputation as one of the most creative innovators in SF, and one of the genre's finest short-story writers. His first novel, *What Entropy Means to Me*, is considered a cult classic in some circles. His most popular novel is probably the gritty and fascinating "When Gravity Fails," a finalist for the Hugo Award in 1987. His short story "Schrodinger's Kitten," set in the same *milieu*, went on to win both the Hugo Award and a Nebula Award in 1988. His many other books include the novels *A Fire in the Sun* and *The Exile Kiss* (the sequels to *When Gravity Fails*), *The Wolves of Memory*, *The Bird of Time*, *Those Gentle Voices*, *Utopia 3*, and *Heroics*, and his large body of stylish, funny, and sometimes sur-realistic short stories have been gathered in the collections *Mixed Feelings*, *Irrational Numbers*, *Idle Pleasures*, and *The Old Funny Stuff*. Effinger lives in New Orleans.

When he sets himself to it, Effinger can produce some of the funniest short fiction ever written, putting him in the select company of people like R. A. Lafferty, Robert Sheckley, Howard Waldrop, John Sladek, and Avram Davidson. The bittersweet fantasy that follows, however, though certainly wry and satirical, is considerably more poignant than it is funny. It is, in fact, very aptly named.

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I

It was one of those warm, summery afternoons where you *know* that Something Grand is going to happen, but the only problem is whether you ought to go out to meet it or not, or wait around your house to be pleasantly surprised. Waiting around the house has its points, for you can always say, "Yes, well, perhaps it would be better, *if* Something Grand is to happen

today, to me, here, it may be better to Have A Bit Of A Snack just in case. In case Something Grand *does* happen, so that I won't be left All At Sea, as it were."

But going out to look for S.G. has just as many good points, because then you could take A Bit Of A Snack along with you on the search, and you always stood the chance of running into Rabbit or Piglet on the way. It certainly was better to have Something Grand happen with Piglet watching, than to have it alone in your house, as Grand as that may be to tell about afterward. And this is what decided the case. Bear made him-self a honey and honey sandwich and set out carelessly, purely by chance in the direction of Piglet's house.

It was one of those summery afternoons out of doors, also. Bear walked along through the Forest happily, not actually laughing-happy but sort of smiling and humming as if he didn't know *for sure* about that Something. The tall trees of the Forest waved in the wind, as if they didn't know *for sure*, either, and Bear took that as a Good Sign and felt even Grander. He walked for a while, and after a time to his surprise he found himself in front of Piglet's house.

"Ho," thought Bear, "why, here I am at Piglet's, and my sandwich seems to have been left behind. Perhaps Piglet may have found it somewhere, or one like it, and we can discuss *that*, of course, and who knows but that Something might happen?"

Piglet lived in the middle of the Forest in a large beech tree. The front door to the house had neither bell cord nor knocker, as did some of the other, more elegant houses in the Forest. Piglet was always surprised and delighted whenever someone came to visit *him*, but first he stood in the middle of his large room and quivered, not exactly knowing what to expect. He was not the bravest animal in the Forest, and a simple knock on the door was enough to set him quivering, until he actually answered the call and discovered one of his very good friends. Thus it was that Bear generally called to him first, before knocking. "Piglet?" he would cry. "It's just me, Bear, your friend. I'm going to knock on your door so that you'll know that I've come to visit."

Then he would knock, and Piglet would quiver anyway. When at last he opened the door to his house he would say, "Bear! Come in! You gave me quite a start." And Bear would come in.

This morning, though, Bear stopped before he shouted to Piglet in

the beech tree. His mouth opened but he didn't say anything, and his brown paw stopped in the air, because over his head in the sky he saw Something. It looked like a flock of little silver birds, or a swarm of big silver bees. Bear frowned to himself, because he could remember some other interesting times that he had had with bees. These silver bees were fly-ing by very fast, and they buzzed so loudly that when he called out to Piglet, Bear couldn't hear his own voice.

Very soon the noise from the silver bees faded away, and Bear knocked on Piglet's door. The door didn't open; instead, Bear heard Piglet's voice from inside. "Oh, Bear!" he squealed. "It's you! Come in!" Bear opened the door to Piglet's house and went in. He couldn't see Piglet anywhere, but he did see a very suspicious quivering beneath a rug on the floor.

"I suppose you heard the buzzing of those silver bees," said Bear, as Piglet appeared from under the rug.

"Why, yes," said Piglet, his ears still pink. "I think I heard it when I was ... I was ... I was looking for something that I might have lost un-derneath this rug." He was *still* quivering.

"I see," said Bear.

"Silver bees, you say?" said Piglet.

Bear rubbed his nose, unsure that the Something Grand could be anywhere in Piglet's room, because the room looked exactly the way it had always looked. "Yes," he said.

"They must have been awfully big bees to make such a noise."

"Yes, I suppose." Bear was beginning to think of suggesting a trip to see Owl, whom they hadn't visited since yesterday.

"I wonder what sort of hive they live in. It must be bigger than any that we've *ever seen* in the Forest," said Piglet as he patted the rug flat, tak-ing out all the Piglet-shaped folds.

Now Bear is not known among his friends, who all love him dearly nevertheless, for having the sharpest wits in the Forest. Indeed, he is the one to whom even the simplest Plans of Operation must be explained, and usually more than once. But Bear knew bees, and he knew beehives, being a bear. And so he thought that the silver bees should, indeed, have a great

big hive. And, the idea trickled through, a great big hive must have a great deal of HONEY. Now it was plain to see that a Great Deal of Honey would be Something Grand on any occasion. Bear was very proud to have solved the mystery ever so quickly, and even before any-one else knew that there was a mystery, completely by himself (although Piglet had maybe helped just the least bit). The only thing that remained was to get the honey out of the hive, which was always a problem that needed a Careful Scheme.

“Let us go see Owl,” announced Bear after this bit of thinking. It had made him quite tired and unable to come up with a Careful Scheme, too. “Perhaps you have some provisions about, and then we could be all set in case Something Grand happens *before* we get to Owl’s, so that we should be able to tell him all about it. And then, if Something Grand *doesn’t* happen, we shouldn’t be too disappointed.”

“Is Something Grand to happen today?” asked Piglet, who really hadn’t had the same feeling that morning, and certainly not after the buzzing of the silver bees had shaken up his house.

“Well, one never knows that it will, for sure,” said Bear, looking for a moment as if he really did have a prodigious brain in there after all, “but, again, one never knows that it won’t, either, on the other hand. In either case, a Bit of Lunch is the safest way.” And then he looked like the same dear old Bear.

So Bear and Piglet set out for Owl’s house. Bear was thinking that he would like that Something Grand to happen *before* they reached Owl’s, because, with Piglet, he already had to give half away, and, should Owl join in the venture, the Something must be further divided. Not, he hastily interrupted himself, that he was so selfish that he didn’t want his friends to enjoy his Good Fortune, but rather that the more people who were in on the adventure originally, the less of an appreciative audience he could expect afterward, just in the event that some celebrative poem might suggest itself to him.

The sun lit the beeches and firs of the Forest perfectly, just the way Bear had been taught that the sun ought to on such a summery day. The clouds were small and quick, and were having their own Important Business in the very blue sky. The familiar path unfolded like an old and especially favorite story.

And then the bees returned. Some flew overhead so high that the sun made tiny, bright stars of them, and some flew by closer, so that they

screached louder than anything Bear or Piglet had ever heard. Piglet quivered, and held tight to Bear, who realized that he would have to Be Stout for them both but didn't want to. The bees seemed to spit at them as they flew past, and the ground jumped up in straight little rows, like spouting teakettles going *thitt! thitt! thitt! thitt! thitt! thitt!* around them. Sometimes the rows of flying dirt and grass would lead to a tree, and then instead of a *thitt!* there would be a *thokk!* and a piece of the tree would fly off over their heads.

Just before they got to Owl's house they found Owl, lying on the ground as if he had fallen asleep before reaching his bed. He thrashed as though he were having bad dreams, flapping his ruffled wings against the ground. He wouldn't talk except in very small, un-Owl-like noises, and Bear and Piglet decided that he may have been hit by one of the *thitts* or maybe a *thokk*. The best thing seemed to be to carry him home and put him to bed. Bear said that they might be able to fix him up A Bit Of A Snack, which looked like a good idea all 'round.

When they got to Owl's house they put him to bed, and he rested there very quietly, without any of his usual pronouncements. Bear and Piglet found this very strange. Bear explained that it was a day for Something Grand, and not at all a day for Being Still and Mysterious. Unless, Bear thought to himself, unless you were part of some large and secret Something Grand that you didn't want to tell anyone (like Bear) about yet. Bear smiled to himself proudly for figuring out Owl's secret. Two puzzles solved already, before lunchtime! In any event, Owl said nothing and did not seem to move in his bed.

After a time, during which Piglet had fixed them a small and rather incomplete sort of Snack, the bees came back again. Bear and Piglet watched them from Owl's window. The bees did not fly so high as before, and looked larger even than any birds that they had ever seen. The bees roared as they flew, and Bear and Piglet were frightened even though they were in old Owl's home right in the middle of their own Forest. Silver eggs dropped from the bees, and when they fell to the ground they burst into huge, boiling, orange and black clouds of flame. Bear watched silently; Piglet was suddenly nowhere to be found. With every flash of fire there was a horrible thunder that shook the tree that was Owl's home.

After a time the bees went away. Bear stood by the window, watching the flaming trees shrivel and fall. There was a knock on Owl's door, and a voice called out hoarsely. Bear recognized it as belonging to the gray Donkey. He opened the door for Donkey, and felt a flash of heat from the

raging fires outside.

“Hullo, Bear.”

“Hullo, Donkey.”

“Looks like a busy morning. We’re always having Busy Mornings whenever I specially decide to have a little nap. But I don’t suppose a nap is very important if everyone else decides to have a Busy Morning.” He indicated the burning Forest with a flick of his floppy ears. “Is that your idea? If it is, it certainly busied up the morning. It looks like it will use up most of the afternoon as well. Not that I mind, you understand, I can see how you might forget to notify me; but I would like to schedule that nap *sometime*.”

“No, Donkey, I don’t think that is my idea,” said Bear, feeling just a little guilty because he knew that he did have that Something Grand feeling. But he wasn’t at all sure that this was the sort of Grand Something that he was looking forward to.

“I was standing around in my little part of the bracken,” said Donkey. “You know how my little part is more or less marshy and wet and cold and altogether unpleasant. Not that I’m complaining, you see, but *some-one* has to live there, I suppose, while the rest of you live out here in the really comfortable places. And I don’t really mind. But, as I was saying, there I was, eating my thistles (which are hardly delicious, but that *is* all that I have, and I’m not one to complain), when this group of men came running through, splashing around in my stream, turning my little yard into a perfect swamp, if you like swamps, which I don’t particularly, especially in my own living room. And I tried to be civil, as much as I can be to men, but do they listen? Why, they do not. They point their machines and start making a horrible racket, and my little spot of home is torn to pieces. Now, it’s not the most attractive spot in the Forest, I’ll be the first to admit that, but it *is* home to me, and I was pretty upset when they started knocking it all to bits. But they looked like they were having such a good time running around and shouting and pointing their fingers and blasting away that I decided that I would just come over here and sit awhile.” And Donkey did sit, flopping in a corner of Owl’s parlor with a sullen expression, and he didn’t say another word.

After a time there was a series of *whumps!* After each *whump!* there would be a terrible clap of thunder and a large part of the Forest would disappear in a black cloud, leaving only a smoking hole. Bear watched this

silently, his hands clasped behind his back, until the *whumps! went away*, too. Then the men that Donkey had seen arrived, running around in front of Owl's house and shouting. Some of them had metal tanks strapped on their backs, and these men began to spray more fire from long hoses at-tached to the tanks. Soon all the gorse and brush in this part of the wood was afire, and the larger trees were beginning to catch, too. Bear thought for a moment about his other friends in the other parts of the Forest.

"Did you see Rabbit on your way here?" he asked Donkey.

"Yes," said Donkey.

"Oh. Perhaps he will come here, too."

"You know that I am hardly an expert in these matters," said Donkey, "but I am of the opinion that Rabbit will not be coming."

"Oh," said Bear. The men outside were rapidly chopping away at whatever of the standing saplings and trees remained. "Perhaps Christ—"

The guns of the men drowned out Bear's voice. He stood by the win-dow and watched; Donkey sat in his corner. Piglet was still off Some-where, doing Something. During a sudden lull in the noise Bear turned from the window.

"I think that I know what we need," he said. "If only Christ—"

"As I said before," said Donkey, "I'm not the most experienced mem-ber of our little band. But I am sure, I am very, *very* sure, that he will not be coming either."

Bear stared at him sadly for some time, until a crash behind him made them all start. Something had been thrown through the window. It was a rough, gray-green object with a handle. In the few seconds before it went off there was a strange silence, during which they could all hear the dis-tant chattering of the helicopters.

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The summer had very definitely come to its conclusion, running smack into autumn, as it has its way of doing; Mole thought to himself that it was very

fortunate indeed that he and Water Rat had managed to finish up this bit of adventure before the really cold weather set in. Now was the time for steaming tea in china cups, and cedar shakes crackling in the fire, and, above all else, *stories* about adventuring. But Mole knew that mucking about the countryside on strange errands had its season, and that time was not autumn. The short breather that Nature in her wisdom permits between the fevers of the warm weather and the sleepy contemplation of winter was for only one thing: sitting comfortably, dry and warm in Ratty's snug rooms at River Bank, planning the excursion of next year.

And as the year found its way to its end, so did this particular day. The sun was going down through the carmine sky, and the late afternoon was so absolutely lovely, in a purely autumn and unhurried way, that both animals kept their own counsel, as if by unspoken mutual consent fearing to disturb that fragile beauty that they thought had passed, too, with the pleasanter temperatures. "It is like this every year," thought the Mole. "Autumn *is* such a wonderful time of year, there is really nothing else quite like it. And the trees now are really without their equal in the sameness of the summer's colors! Why do I always seem to forget that autumn is, after all, my favorite season?" Perhaps the Rat was thinking the same thoughts, for after a time the Mole could hear him whispering his poetry words, about pumpkins and frost and that sort of thing.

As the twilight deepened around the pair while they crossed a meadow yet some distance from their goal, the Rat stopped still in his tracks. "Mole, my good friend and true companion," he said, "it is October." Rat bent back his silky head and gazed silently into the sky, which was growing bluer and darker blue, and already a star or two had edged into view. "Where does the year go?" And then he moved on, his hands clasped behind his back, or shoved into the shallow pockets of his thin coat.

At the other side of the meadow they found a low, broken-backed fence of timber and, as there did not appear to be a gate, the Mole stood on the lowest beam and vaulted over. Rat made as to follow but, before he grasped the topmost timber, he turned and looked out across the field that next they would cross. He paused for a moment, and Mole knew that he could expect a bit of poetry. And so the Rat recited:

*"Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
In looking on the happy autumn-fields,*

And thinking of the days that are no more.”

“Hmmm,” said the Mole, moved but unsure if he were glad or totally melancholy. “Quite lovely, but not without its proper weight of sensibility.”

“Tennyson,” said the Rat.

“Hmmm.” And this was all that was said for a longish period of time, as they made their way over the field of stalks of last summer’s corn. The field was set off on the farther side by another barrier like the one that they previously had crossed. They passed over, and were in a large cop-pice of mountain ash.

“It will take but one good shower to loose these leaves at last,” said the Rat. “Then the rowan will stand winter-bare, and we will be left for a time with nothing to remind us of the summer but the cry of the jay.”

“Ratty,” said the Mole in a small voice, “might I ask of you the least favor?”

“Certainly, Mole. You ought to know that you are my dearest of friends.”

“Why, if you please, it is nothing, actually. But you keep saying the *most* saddening things, so that while I am going along thinking about how wonderful it will be to find River Bank once more, and about how delightful; everything will be when we’re all tucked in at home again, you say something to make me feel all tumbled about inside and downright *abandoned*. Sometimes I want to stop right here, or turn around and *look* for our lost summer. Certainly it is autumn, and winter is coming on. There’s no use saying that it isn’t. But it’s happened to us before, and I do so wish that you could talk of spring and punting about in the boat for the first time of the new season, or at least, if it must be autumn, then how lovely it is to see Orion again. Because it is hard, it is so hard to be sad and in un-familiar territory at the same time.” This was a rather long speech for the poor Mole, but he was always so affected by poetry. And of course Ratty understood, and thoughtfully made his comments to cheer his companion.

And thus the stand of rowan was passed, and more relics of fields, and open meads where the eyes of animals glared like little glass marbles from the clumps of brown grass. It was night now, no use at all trying to call it “evening,” and Mole, whose habits had been set in his later life at re-tiring early and rising with the sun, began to feel uncomfortable. Even one as

adventured as he, who had seen more odd things than ever he could have dreamed in his parochial molish youth, was glad that he was not alone beneath the watchful gaze of the diamond stars. He walked with his head tucked down and his short, stubby arms held at his sides; every once in a while he stumbled, as upon an unseen clod of dirt or half-buried stone, and fell against Water Rat, mumbling apologies and feeling grate-ful for the solid presence of his friend.

The Mole's thoughts were exclusively of home; he employed the memories of long-out-of-sight friends and out-of-mind, familiar objects to hold back both, the pressing darkness and the insistent, cold wind. But the home of his reveries was not always River Bank, where he had gone to live upon discovering the joys of riverside life and meeting River Bank's most gen-erous and gentle tenant, the Water Rat. No, the cozy fires that he imag-ined burned as often as not in his own relinquished place at Mole End. The more he thought, the cozier the picture became, until he was just on the point of asking the Rat if they might stop there for the night, rather than going on to River Bank. It was very late, of course, and it was get-ting colder and colder. Mole's hands were nearly without sensation, and his poor feet were *his* only by virtue of their aching. He knew that there was a small supply of food left in his rooms (mainly a tin of Danish bacon and some capers); a small but sufficient supper might be coaxed from his forsaken pantry. It would be nice to stop by again; it had been so long, and perhaps the detour would be advisable, just to check that all was still in order. And then the trip to River Bank could be continued after a good rest, and perhaps something more undiscovered would appear for a bit of breakfast, although—

“—Beyond that hedge, I should think,” said the Water Rat.

“Eh?” said Mole, who realized that the Rat had stopped by the way-side and had been speaking to him for no little time. “I'm sorry, Ratty, but perhaps my ears are a little numb, too.”

“I merely suggested that, as I calculate, your very nice Mole End should be in a field very near, perhaps just on the other side of the hedge on that knoll, there. It would be a convenience to spend the night there tonight, for I, at least, have just about had a full time of it. That is, of course, if the plan meets with your approval. I should hate to invite my-self around in this way, except that I *am* so infernally exhausted. How-ever, if you would rather remain with our original—”

“Oh, remarkable, Ratty!” cried Mole. “Have you been eavesdropping on my secretest thoughts? Oh, thank you, I would so like to see my old

home again.” The two companions discussed their situation further, and agreed to pass the night at Mole End, although it would not be as comfortable as had they pressed on to River Bank. The next day would be one of cleaning and tidying up after their long absence, and also of the happy chore of visiting their friends and spending tea, dinner, and supper regaling them with the history of their adventures. The Mole and the Rat began to feel better, warmer inside if not out, and both knew that welcome tingle of anticipation. At last, they were coming home.

The Mole could hardly control his excitement as he topped the low rise and passed through an opening in the hedgerow. It was far too dark to see, but (if Ratty’s estimate were correct) he ought to be able to smell the first fair indications of his old neighborhood. And there they were! His nose twitched with pleasure as he scented those familiar signals. But they were arriving somewhat muffled, as though buried under strange and unknown smells. The Mole strained his eyes to try to aid his bewildered nose, but of course all that he could see was a bright glow before him.

“Is that morning already?” he asked.

“No,” said Rat, his voice peculiarly grim.

“Because I didn’t think that the night had passed so quickly. We must have come much farther than ever we thought. Or else this quite proves my theory that the time you spend asleep is actually less than the equal number of daylight hours,” said the Mole, chuckling at his very small joke.

“No, we’ve been heading west for some time, in any event.”

They walked toward the light, upon a curious hard black surface. The ground had been made flat and smooth, and covered over with some material. It was this that the Mole’s nose could not identify. As they came closer it became evident that the light was originating from a group of shining lamps placed high on poles. These were situated about the queer field in widely spaced rows.

“Your home ought to be right about here,” said the Rat, indicating a spot on the blacktop between two painted yellow lines.

“It looks as though I have a bit of work,” said the Mole unhappily. “They seem to have covered over my tunnel.” He set to immediately, trying with his freezing paws to get through the pavement to his warm little burrow.

“Oh, Ratty, it...won’t...*dig!*” And the gasping Mole sat down on the

blacktop, tears forming in his tiny eyes. The Rat was stricken by the sadness of his friend, and thought that Mole should at least make another attempt, if only because that seemed so much more positive a plan than nocturnal and earnest lamentation. So the Mole turned to once more, working even harder but with the same lack of success. The hard surface of the parking lot resisted his most practiced efforts.

“What are we to do, Ratty?”

“We’ll continue on, of course. It would have been pleasant to stay here, but River Bank isn’t an impossible distance. So buck up; we’ll have you all tucked in soon enough.”

“But that was my *home!*” said the distressed Mole.

“You’ll live with me officially, now. So remember to mind your muddy feet.” But the Water Rat was not so unconcerned as he would have his companion believe. He was nearly as sick at heart as the Mole to find the least trace of Mole End obliterated; animals take only one spot for their home, not like we larger folk who may move about several times before finding one last resting place in our dotage. And animals invest in their single residences all the security and love that they hold in their smaller but wiser selves. Thus it takes a major disruption of life, such as that experienced by the Mole when he turned out his solitary existence for the new and exciting life at River Bank, to enable an animal to quit his chosen home. The Rat was wise enough to know this, and he also knew that it could serve no purpose to let his friend languish in despair.

In accordance then with their revised schedule, the Mole and Water Rat turned south, heading across the lot toward the river. It was quite impossible for either to walk along without picturing in his private and gloomy thoughts the beautiful spot of greenery that had been removed to allow the pavement’s unsightly intrusion. At the far end of the lot, where once had been a border of low hedges and, beyond that, a row of slender poplars, the Rat could make out the dim lines of a huge, square, dark building. He said nothing to the sorrowful Mole, but waited instead until they were close enough to investigate at first hand. He suspected another of Toad’s ephemeral and ill-advised schemes, but surely even Toad had enough romance and enough sense to prevent him from cementing over the countryside.

The building was quite monstrous, and ugly in an efficient sort of way that indicated that it was some sort of factory.

“How long were we gone?” asked the Mole in a hurt tone of voice.

“Much too long, it would seem,” said the Rat.

“Toad?”

“I’m not certain. It would be like his old self to catch on to a seemingly easy moneymaking proposition, and then ruin everyone for miles around. But, of course, to be fair we’ll make inquiries in the morning.”

“Not many folks around anymore to ask,” said a new voice. The Mole and the Water Rat turned around, startled. The voice belonged to a rather small and hungry-looking weasel. He nodded in recognition of the two returned travelers, although neither Mole nor Rat knew him by name.

“Toad’s gone, himself,” said the weasel.

“Old Toad, gone?” said the Mole.

“Yes, sir. Had a spell of warmish weather along about the end of June. One of those still days, not a breath of air to be had; lot of smoke from this factory just hung there, thicker than fog. Some of the older folk couldn’t do it. Apoplexy or something, Mr. Badger called it.”

“You mean Toad’s passed away?” asked the Rat, astonished.

“Yes, sir.”

“Silly old Toad....”

“Good old Toad ... dead?”

There was a shocked silence. After a time the weasel spoke again.

“And then, when they built those new homes across the water, a good many fine weasels and others lost theirs. When they tore down the Wild Wood, that is. Most everybody that I grew up with has left the neighborhood entirely. Gone east, I suppose.”

“They tore down the Wild Wood?” asked Mole in his very small voice.

“And Badger?” asked Rat.

“Well, that is, Mr. Badger got caught up in a load of concrete. When

they were putting in those new homes.”

“*Badger!*” cried the Rat. He was sorely smitten; the Mole just stood, confused, with his long snout wavering in the night air. After a time the Rat roused himself enough to wish the weasel a good evening and grab Mole’s elbow. The two travelers hurried off, following a large corrugated-metal pipe toward the river a short distance away.

At the water’s edge the conduit ended. From its open maw poured a sluggish and foul-smelling stream. The river itself seemed slow-moving and evil.

“What have they done to my river?” cried the Rat. He stared across in the gloom, but he could not make out the night-shrouded features of his house. After a bit of a search he located the small boat that had been left tied up on the Mole’s side of the water so many months previously. The Rat allowed Mole to enter, meanwhile undoing the knotted painter. He threw the line into the boat and pushed off, stepping into the river to do so. The water felt oily and unpleasant, and the Rat shuddered as he hopped into the skiff and grabbed the oars. He rowed in silence, and the Mole was similarly lost in his own thoughts. On the other side Mole leaped out and hauled the boat to shore, where the Rat joined him after shipping the oars.

River Bank was ruined. The outside of the dwelling was coated with a thick, sludgy layer that had seeped inside and spoiled everything: fur-niture, books, food stores, everything. Rat viewed the scene with grow-ing anger and frustration, but remained quiet. Finally he took the Mole’s elbow once again.

“Come along, old friend. It’s obvious that we can’t stay here, either.”

“Where shall we go, Ratty? We have nowhere to go.”

“And nothing to take with us. That’s fine, I suppose; a new start, new beginnings. Although we’re both a bit far along for that sort of thing. But, what’s done is done, and no use being resentful. Let us leave soon, while I still have the strength of this impulse, and before I truthfully realize that everything I’ve ever had is wasted and made into rubbish.”

So they took to the water, following the course of the stream and the cold night wind. The Rat took the first turn at rowing while the Mole drowsed. Then they switched; Mole rowed and Water Rat failed in his resolve to stay awake and hunt for a likely place to spend the night. The Rat dropped off to sleep, and the Mole’s rowing grew slower and slower as he,

too, fell fast asleep. They were both awakened some time later by the lurching of the boat in the strong current.

“Oh, Mole,” said the Rat accusingly, “*have you* lost the oars? Where? Just now?”

“I don’t know, Ratty! I suppose that I’ve drifted off to sleep, and I don’t know just when I dropped the oars. Where are we? Oh, I’m so sorry, but I’m just so tired!”

“I don’t know where we are, my very good Mole. I’m sorry for speak-ing to you in that unkind way. I don’t recognize any of this shoreline that we’re passing, so I assume that we’ve both been getting back a good share of the night’s rest that we have cheated ourselves of so far. It looks as if our adventures *aren’t* over yet.”

The river had grown broader and stronger than they had ever seen it. The boat and its two weary passengers followed helplessly wherever it led them. The Rat must have dozed again, for he was awakened by the Mole’s excited cry.

“Rat, do you see? The dawn, now for sure. At least we won’t be trav-eling in the dark any longer. Oh, how glad I will be to see the sun!”

But Mole was incorrect once more; it was not the sun. The fierce, ruddy glow on the river ahead was caused by artificial means, though not as be-fore in the parking lot. As the crippled rowboat sped nearer in the river’s grasp, it became clear to the Water Rat that the light was from a great fire. Indeed, up ahead the thick, orange water of the river itself was blaz-ing in a towering wall of flame.

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