

When the Great Days Came

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Gardner R. Dozois lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He recently retired from the editorship of Asimov's, after winning 13 Hugo Awards as best editor, and establishing Asimov's as the leading magazine of the day in SF. Before that, he was one of the leading anthologists in SF, and he continues to be very active as an anthologist. He has published nearly sixty anthologies, sometimes co-edited with others, often Jack M. Dann. His most prominent anthology since 1984 is the annual Year's Best Science Fiction, a recasting and expansion of Best SF Stories of the Year, which he edited from 1977 to 1987 (5 volumes). He began writing SF in the 1960s, and has published fiction throughout his career, though less often since 1984. Some of his stories are collected in The Visible Man (1977), Slow Dancing Through Time (1990), Geodesic Dreams (1992), and Morning Child and Other Stories (2004).

"When the Great Days Came" was published in Fantasy & Science Fiction. It is an amusing tale that proves that even the end of the world as we know it might look quite different to a rat. It's all a matter of point of view.

The rat slunk down the dark alley, keeping close to the comforting bulk of the brick wall of an abandoned warehouse, following scent trails that it and thousands of its kind had laid down countless times before. It stopped to snatch up a cockroach, crunching it in its strong jaws, and to sniff at a frozen patch of garbage, and then scurried on. Above it, the stars shone bright and cold where a patch of night sky looked down into the deep stone canyon of the alleyway.

It was in an alley near 10th and Broadway, in New York City, although the human terms meant nothing to it, but as far as the world it lived in and the kind of life it led in that world was concerned, it would have made very little difference if it had been in any big city in the world.

It's tempting to give the rat an anthropomorphic humanized name like Sleektail or Sharptooth or Longwhiskers, but in fact the only "name" it had was a scent-signature composed of pheromones and excretions from its scent-glands, the tang of its breath, and the hot rich smell of its anus; so it had no name that could be even approximately rendered in human terms, nor would the human concept of a name, with all the freight of implications that go with it, have meant anything to it.

The rat emerged from the alley, and shrank back as a car flashed by in a sudden burst of light and wind and the perception of hurtling mass, and a stink of rubber and burning gasoline you could smell coming blocks away. One of its litter-mates had been killed by one of these monsters back in the summer, almost half a lifetime ago, and the rat had been wary of them ever since. When the car had passed, leaving the night quiet again in its wake, the rat reared up to sniff the air for a moment, then lowered itself down to follow the curb, keeping its shoulder brushing against it as it ran.

At the corner of a side street, an inch-wide hole had been gnawed under one of the concrete sidewalk slabs. The rat paused to collapse its skeleton and change the shape of its head, and then squeezed through the hole into the tunnel beyond.

(It wouldn't do to leave you with the impression that there was anything unusual about this. The rat wasn't a mutant or a shapeshifting alien—it was just a rat. All of its millions of brethren had this ability, as did many other rodents, their skulls not being plated together like those of other mammals, so that they could

squeeze themselves through an opening three-quarters of an inch wide, or smaller, depending on the size of the rat.)

Once under the sidewalk, the rat entered a world that humans never saw, and which they couldn't have accessed even if they knew about it: a three-dimensional space wrapped in a madly complex skein around and under and *within* the human world, like something from an Escher print, a world composed of spaces and tunnels under the sidewalks and streets, of subway tunnels (some of them, including whole lost stations, abandoned for almost a hundred years), of forgotten basements and sub-basements and sub-sub-basements, of ineffectually boarded-up warehouses and decaying brownstones, of sewers, of service tunnels through which ran pipes conveying steam or water or electricity or gas, of alleys and trash-strewn tenement backyards, of disused pipes at construction sites, of runways through the bushes and deep tangled undergrowth of urban parks and squares, of the maze of low roofs and crumbling chimneys that broke around the flanks of newer skyscrapers like a scummy brick-and-tarpaper surf (although the lordly skyscrapers too had places visited by rats, in the deep roots of the buildings where humans seldom went), and of the crawl-spaces between floors and under the floorboards and inside the walls of almost every building in the city. The rat rarely ventured more than a few blocks from its burrow, but if it had wanted to, it could have traveled from tunnel to chamber to tunnel—ducking out from a crack in a foundation, up a drain-spout, across a roof, in again at a sewer grate—all the way across Manhattan to the Bronx and back to Brooklyn without ever coming out into the open air for more than a few seconds at a time.

Now it followed a narrow tunnel down to a widened-out chamber lined with torn-up newspapers and trash bags and shopping bags, the place where it and a dozen of its brothers and sisters had been born, and where it still slept many nights with an assortment of other bachelors. It would be anthropomorphizing again to ascribe human feelings of sentiment or nostalgia to the rat, although as it paused to sniff the heavy, cloying odors of the burrow, perhaps it's not too much to suggest that it gained some comfort or a feeling of momentary security from the long-familiar scents. Then it was off again, down another, longer tunnel that led out, from a hole behind a drainspout, into another alley.

It wasn't looking for anything in particular—it was just *looking*. It had spent most of the nights of its life like this, restlessly pacing from place to place to place within its range, with no particular goal or destination in mind, but instantly ready to take advantage of whatever opportunities it came across on the way.

The rat stopped to lap up some Coke from a tossed-out soft-drink cup, relishing the sudden sharp sweetness, then ducked into a building through a hole gnawed in the molding, and into the dusty maze of crawlspaces between floors and ceilings, and behind walls. Whiskers twitching with sudden interest, it followed the scent of a receptive female, and found her among long-shuttered boxes and shrouded furniture in an attic, but a bigger rat—a veteran almost two years old—had found her first and was already mounting her. The bigger rat growled at him over her back without missing a stroke, showing yellowed fangs, and, resentfully, the rat retreated, back into the interior spaces between walls, then out onto a roof in the cold night air.

There was a smell of cat here, and while the rat wasn't too worried about cats (few of whom would tackle a full-grown rat), caution prompted it to move on anyway. It ghosted across a roof, across a connecting roof, and then into a space left where a brick had fallen out of a long-dead chimney. Down the chimney shaft to a fireplace which had had a sheet of tin clumsily nailed over it decades before, out through one sagging corner, and into a room filled with the ghostly, sheet-covered hulks of crumbling, mildewed Victorian furniture—the kind of place, if this were a fantasy, where it might have stopped to consult with a wise old Rat King tied tail to tail to tail, but which in reality contained only the crisscrossing tracteries of tiny footprints in the deep dust of the floor. Into a hole in the kitchen baseboard, out into an

enclosed tenement yard cluttered with broken chairs and an overturned swing set, all buried in weeds, out under the bottom of a board fence, and into another dank alley, following now the enticing scent of food.

This was prime scavenging territory, an alley behind a block that contained three or four restaurants and fast-food places, always filled with easily gnawed-through green trash bags and overflowing metal garbage barrels. The rat sniffed around the barrels, nosed half a gnawed hot-dog and some Cheese Doodles out from under a clutter of plastic trash and cans, swallowed the food hurriedly, and then found a real prize: a discarded pizza box with two pieces of pizza still inside.

Most rats love pizza, and this rat was no exception. It had just settled down contentedly to gnaw on a slice of Sicilian when a wave of alien stink and the clatter of heavy, clumsy footsteps told it that a human was coming. And there it was, lumbering ponderously down the alley, a vast, shambling giant that seemed to tower impossibly into the sky.

For a moment, the rat held its position defiantly astride the pizza box, but then the human spotted it and yelled something at it in its huge, blaring, bellowing voice.

The resentment the rat had felt when it had been chased away from the willing female earlier returned, sharper and hotter and fiercer than ever. The rat was an exceptionally bright rat, but, of course, it was just a rat, and so it didn't have the words, or the concepts that grew from the words, to articulate the feelings that roiled within it. If it *had* had the words, it might almost have been able, for a flickering moment, to dream of a world where things were different, a day when rats didn't have to give way to humans, when they could go where they wanted to go and do what they wanted to do without having to scurry away and hide whenever a human came near.

But it didn't have the words, and so the vision it had almost grasped guttered and died without ever quite coming into full focus, leaving only the tiniest smoky shard of itself behind in its mind.

The rat stood its ground for a second longer, an act of almost insane bravery in its own context, but then the human bellowed again and threw a bottle at it, and the rat darted away, leaving the prize behind, vanishing instantly behind the garbage barrels and away unseen down the alley, keeping to the shadows.

As Fate would have it, it was the very same rat, an hour later, up on another tarpaper tenement roof, sniffing at a box of Moo Shu Pork spilling out of a green trash bag that the tenants had been too lazy to take downstairs to the curb, who saw a trail of fire cut suddenly across the winter sky, and who reared up on its hind legs in time to see the glowing disk of the six-mile-wide asteroid pass over the city, on its way to a collision with a hillside north of Chibougamau in Northern Quebec.

The rat watched, sitting back on its haunches, as the glowing thing passed below the horizon. A moment later, the northern sky turned red, a glow that spread from horizon to horizon east to west, as if the sun were coming up in the wrong place, and then a bright pillar of fire climbed up over the horizon, and grew and grew and grew. Already the blast-front of the impact was rushing over the ground toward the city at close to a thousand miles per hour, a blow that would ultimately wipe the human race as well as the rat itself and most—but not *all*—of its kin off the face of the Earth.

Moments from death, the rat had no way to know it, but— after a pause for millions of years of evolution, and for radiating out to fill soon-to-be-vacated ecological niches—its day had come round at last.