

Speech Sounds



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I Touched the Rat

By Toniann Fernandez

I touched the rat, and then I went to my boyfriend's house to eat lasagne. He had been making it for two days. First, he shaped a mass of ground meat into beautiful little spheres. Then he drowned them in tomato sauce and heated them until the boiling hot sauce, unbearable for the spheres, broke them down into tiny, floating bits.

Earlier in the day I was feeling good because I knew I was going to touch the rat. I had almost touched a wild rat the night before, when, listening to *Prisencolinensinainciusol* on my stoop, one approached me, and got quite close. *Prisencolinensinainciusol* is an Italian song about communication that is written in gibberish. Its author, Adriano Celentano defines the unintelligible word as universal love. I had never seen a rat on my stoop before.

The visit seemed auspicious. I took my rubber gloves out from under my sink and thought about making some popcorn as bait, however, a few people, like my therapist, made it seem like touching the street rat was a worse idea than was immediately obvious to me. I decided a domestic rat would be just as well. I called three ratless pet stores in Manhattan before discovering that the Paradise Aquarium in Ridgewood, just a 17 minute walk or a 15 minute bus ride away, had small, medium, and jumbo rats. I had imagined a longer bus ride, but figured that in this case, making things more complicated didn't necessarily make them better.

I was troubled on the bus because the only language I heard people speaking was Spanish, but the only language I heard the bus speaking was United States of American English. It announced our location, "Fresh Pond Road and Catalpa Avenue." A sphere-headed cartoon person on an MTA advertisement wore a mask that had "masks speak louder than words" written across it, and gave a thumbs up to a couple wearing "I take care of you, you take care of me," masks. They nodded

at two Marines on a passing double billboard that read "For our nation. For us all."

There was a Jeep Wrangler with a blue lives matter sticker parked near the Putnam and Fresh Pond stop where I exited the bus. I saw three police officers wearing masks on their faces but not on their badges. I asked them why their badges needed masks at the protests, but not here on Fresh Pond Road during the first snow of winter. "Wearing a mask on your badge is how you protect blue lives," one replied, "and we feel pretty safe here."

When I entered the Paradise Aquarium, I was met with a monolithic poster of their "Ten Commandments" calligraphed in black marker. The first commandment was "Thou shall not overcrowd." The ninth was "Thou shall not put fast moving fish with slow moving fish." I walked toward the sound of rat chatter, passed a thin, fleshy fish that looked like the palm of my hand, and locked eyes with an orange and black Clown Loach. "Do no-moving fish count as slow moving fish?" he asked. I shrugged and kept walking.

The chatter grew louder. I arrived at the rat tanks and knelt beside them, enveloped in a bath of squeaks and gnaws. There were hundreds of rats. They were all albino. Most of them turned to look at me with their noses, smelling my presence more than seeing it. They stood on their back feet and hovered upright, pushing their snouts as close to the crosshatched wire lid as they could. Their pink noses wriggled tiny gusts of air in, sniffing me out, hypnotizing me. I drifted into the memory of meeting Doctor Smell.

Doctor Smell wore a gold chain with an expensive looking nose pendant around her neck. We met by accident at a dinner neither of us was invited to. She bragged about her PhD in olfaction before asking me, "What do you do?"

I watched quietly as she plucked herbs from a nearby flower box that I had, hours before, seen a drunk man use as a toilet. Pressing the leaves against her face, she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, then opened them, apparently awaiting my

response. The silence broke when a long, slow, “Fffffuuuuuuuuucccccckkk yyyyyyyyouuuuu,” started to escape from my mouth. Does speech so flatulent carry an odor? And if so, would it have mattered if I was able to stop it at the fuuuu? Or had she already smelled it?

“Do you need help?” A Paradise Aquarium employee named Pete was suddenly standing very close to me. I was startled by his question.

“Yes,” I replied, then lied to him. “My partner wants a rat and I told him that I would go touch one to see if I could deal with it.” This was not true. My partner did not want a rat, but I could not tell him that I believed that touching the rat would unleash the desires buried in my subconscious. “We have a cat,” I needlessly went on. He explained that this could be an issue, “because, you see, cats like to hunt. You may need to weigh down the lid of the rat tank with a brick so the cat can’t get in.” I could feel the conversation moving in the wrong direction, and decided that when you conceal your intentions, you are more likely to receive misguided advice.

“They look smart,” I interrupted. “Yeah, they were all lab raised,” he replied. “Can I hold one?” I asked. “Sure,” Pete replied, “let’s start with a small one.” “No,” I said, “I want to touch the big one.” He explained that small, medium, and jumbo rats are all the same breed but different ages. I stared at him silently.

He pulled a sneaker sized rat from the tank by its tail. I squealed that I wasn’t nervous. Pete pointed out that my hands were shaking. I couldn’t stop lying, but I couldn’t do more than lightly brush my hand against the jumbo rat. Pete and I looked at each other awkwardly, and I decided to let the rat salesman take the lead. He opened the medium tank. “Try putting your hand inside.”

I lowered my hand into the tank. When a medium sized rat approached me, placed his hand on my finger, and gazed up and into me, I realized that he was the first stranger I had touched in almost a year. I felt I should leave before my desires started showing. Pete couldn’t have known this, and offered me his fabric

glove to try to lift the rat out of the cage. I put it on, lifted the rat for a second, thanked Pete, returned his glove, considered the ethics of glove sharing, and went to the nearest grocery store to use their hand sanitizer. Under the spell of the rat, I walked toward my boyfriend’s house. We ate lasagne. I brought up desire, he brought up shame, and we spent the next nine hours caged in conversation that felt like mental erotic asphyxiation. Neither of us could see a way out until we passed out. The next morning we read a chapter on taking responsibility for your feelings in Marshall Rosenberg’s *Nonviolent Communication*. I told him that it was important for me to hear that I am wanted in order to believe it. He put his finger on my tongue.

Sometimes when he says “prisencolinensinainciusol,” I only hear the speech sounds, but when he walks toward me and pulls his mask down, I feel communication, love, affection. When we pull our masks up to go inside, it’s hard for me to smell anything but my own mouth.