

Can't Ignore the Rat

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Characters*

Essie, f, 10

David, m, 13, older brother to Essie

Jon, m, 12, the neighbor kid

Rat, any, any, a rat

**all characters should be played by adult actors doing their best to embody the physicality and mindset of children and/or animals truthfully*

Setting

This play takes place in the following “places”: rural farm in Alberta, Canada, winter when it just was fall, a barn turned school room, the mind of a 10 year old undereducated girl, the den of a rat.

Note on the Radio

The Radio the play acts as the bridge between Rat and the children, between the Barn and the outside world. It does not necessarily follow the real world rules that radios must follow, but rather is both a stylistic bridge into the more fantastical elements of the play and a speaker on stage to play with as you see fit. Music, broadcast text, and amplified voice should be present throughout the play in some fashion.

Note on the Rat

Rat stirs the pot. Rat educates. Rat asks questions. Rat should not look like a rat. In contrast to the actors portraying children, Rat should be played as an adult would play an adult character. Rat serves both to bring the influence of the outside that these children lack in their seclusion and act an unnerving unknown manipulator and sometime invader.

“When I was a child, I waited for my mind to grow, for my experiences to accumulate and my choices to solidify, taking shape into the likeness of a person. That person, or that likeness of one, had belonged. I was of that mountain, the mountain that had made me. It was only as I grew older that I wondered if how I had started is how I would end—if the first shape a person takes is their only true shape.”

Tara Westover, *Educated*

ESSIE walks on the balls of her feet to the center of a cold and dark makeshift schoolroom with a toy chest, work table, white board, stacks of books and loose paper.

All the requirements of a barn school room.
A large old radio sits on the table.

ESSIE, a 10 year old girl, rocks on her heels back and forth slowly in place taking in the 4th wall, the audience, with her big eyes. A quick turn and she rushes and arrives under the bell. She rings it 3 times. She waits... she rings it again... nothing... she rings it fast and loud for too long before through the door rush with a roar of light and generator noise 2 pre adolescent boys, DAVID, 13, and then JON, 12.

The bell stops.

The generator roars and the door closes. Everyone signs with relief of the warmth and the light.

We see the three children through their school day. Fast, fluid, practiced, and uninterrupted. The radio tunes in. The girl prays. The boys play catch and tussle. The girl reads sprawled on the floor. She is reading *The Long Winter* by Laura Ingles Wilder. The boys draw then erase Latin phrases on the white board. Maybe some of them are inappropriate, doodling a dick or two. They gather things and leave through the door, letting in the gentle wind and generator noise.

After two rounds of this routine, as if from outer space, RAT appears on the edge of the light, and their voice maybe broadcast through the radio as it moves in and out of static.

RAT

Ahhh... There she is. See the girl one? Essie. The thing about Essie is she wants to save everything.

ESSIE carefully tapes a ripped page from a book and pins it to the whiteboard. With that action the school day is over and all three students exit the room. Wind and noise. The radio tunes to static.

In the dark we hear the static and RAT.

RAT

The thing about a rat is it is known to be the idea...the *thing*... the very image of dirty evil disgusting putrid sick disease rot vermin rodent, the ideal of the inhospitable places of the world. Poor people have rats in their houses. People who are dirty have rats in their houses. We hit them with brooms, pans, guns, and poison. We have pumped arsenic/ in our living rooms to rid our human domesticated lives of them.

ESSIE and DAVID enter again mimicking the routine from before. This time ESSIE is loudly eating an apple. Crunch.

ESSIE

/Arsenic.

DAVID

What?

ESSIE

In apple seeds. If you eat enough of them you

DAVID

Die?

ESSIE

Yeah... I don't know exactly what 'enough' means but let's say it's more than one and less than one thousand.

She writes a note on the whiteboard.

DAVID

Ug really Es math?

The radio broadcast starts. Some words are legible, some aren't.

RADIO

*... truancy... a storm with winds up to... auto parts get yours today... protect your home with sec... welcome back listeners... roads closed... hunting season is just... your daily proverb... it is as sport to a fool to do mischief... wisdom... snow... *static**

They snap mechanically into their daily routine. DAVID turns off the radio. JON arrives. He joins DAVID in his routine. From some hidden place they both pull toy guns and begin firing in a semi dance. ESSIE reads between them.

RAT continues speaking to the audience, unheard by the children.

RAT

Male rats are called bucks; unmated females, does, pregnant or parent females, dams; and infants, kittens or pups. A group of rats is referred to as a mischief. Some people keep them as pets. Maybe a symbol of wealth to take something so filthy and scrub it clean. Keep it by your bedside and feed it morsels of/

ESSIE

/Apple! They don't know she took a bite of an apple/

RAT notices the synchronicity of ESSIE's interjections, surprised and impressed.

ESSIE leaps to her feet with her discovery while the toy gun battle continues and a stray projectile hits her square in the face.

DAVID

Watch out! Jon!

JON

Fuuu.. Essie you alright?

ESSIE

My eye. MY EYE. DAVID!

It hurts. I am seeing spots?

I won't tell mom but David come on... or Jon your dad... oh sorry I didn't mean to bring that up... no it's ok. Don't cry. He's dead but like not that dead he's in heaven I'm sure.

Sure! Jon?

JON

I'm not crying.

DAVID

It looked like you were

JON

Wasn't ok?

ESSIE

I think I need ice.

Snow is the same as ice right?

JON

No

DAVID

Yes

JON

I guess kinda

ESSIE shrugs and lets her book fall to the floor. She stumbles to the door and with great effort opens it. Great sounds of wind and loud generator noise fill the barn. The boys cover their ears.

RAT smiles at the audience.

The door closes and the noise stops. The boys begin sheepishly picking up the toy bullets one by one. A

dance of guilty tense glances between the two of them.

RAT silently points at all the bullets they miss.

RAT

That one over there... almost... oh well

Clueless. Ha. Ha HA HA. Awww?

They'd miss a dead dog if it jumped in their lap.

They'd miss a gold bar bouncing on their bare toes. They'd miss

RAT cranks the radio. It plays something with guitars, loud, and danceable. RAT bobs their head, looking back and forth at the boys. They do not notice. RAT turns the music louder. The boys continue to pick up the rubble bullets in the schoolroom.

Music grows louder once again, cued by RAT.

The boys bump into one another. RAT claps their hands. They boys drop the items in their hands and begin to dance, beginning once again to pick things up but this time unaware they are dancing in sync. The moment grows more fantastical and homoerotic.

RAT

They'd miss each other entirely. Without my encouragement...

The moment shatters as ESSIE, clutching a hand-full of snow in a scarf to her eye, forces back through the door, once again bringing the loud wind and generator noise in to dry out the music. RAT leaps on top of the table and stomps the radio to cut the music but it only increases the volume. DAVID and JON come to, suddenly aware they are holding one another closer than they ever have. They leap apart as ESSIE screams and points.

ESSIE

AHHHHHHHHHHHHH

JON
We're not

DAVID
Are we? Uh no. Wait the radio. How.

JON
Get away from me

ESSIE
A RAT!

JON
Where?

DAVID
Essie calm down. I practically made you blind. I'm sorry but you need to calm down and shut that *freakin* door.

RAT to the audience.

RAT
I'm made aren't I.

ESSIE
NO THERE!

JON
David what should I do?

DAVID
Shut the door!

ESSIE
There! There there there there there...

ESSIE lunges for RAT and RAT leaps off the table. They start a game of cat and mouse, or in this case child and rat. JON attempts to maneuver through them to shut the door. DAVID attempts to grab ESSIE. She is too quick. JON slams the door shut.

ESSIE grabs a box full of papers and play items and dumps it mid scramble, causing a minefield for DAVID.

DAVID
Ow! Essie stop

JON
Got it!

ESSIE
Caught it! Yes yes yes yes! Oh praise oh yay oh yes yes yes. Look!

ESSIE clamps down on her box, RAT stands over her.

RAT
Look in the box Essie. That's me.

ESSIE
I think it got scared and ran. Get off of me! I'm ok.

DAVID
But your eye it's

ESSIE
Nothing. Shut up. Go play with Jon if you're in a chatty mood. Don't you have Latin to memorize?

DAVID
Just don't let it loose. We'll deal with it in a bit.
There's some things, serious things, that *thing* can do. To us.

Looks over at JON and gestures to a corner of the room away from ESSIE and RAT.

ESSIE
ThEre's SoMe SerioUs ThiiiiIngs. Blah blah blah. David always talking to Jon. Jon always blah blah to David.

DAVID

I can hear you.

ESSIE

I know.

RAT

I can hear you too.

ESSIE whispers to the box.

ESSIE

Now look little guy. I can't let you run around all free. Not with the stinky boys over there.

Or the SERIOUS THINGS around.

But I do want to know what you look like up close. Let me just...

ESSIE reaches into her pocket and grabs a pen which she sticks into the top of the box to make a hole. She puts her face to the hole.

RAT jumps.

RAT

Fuck. Ok take it easy.

ESSIE

Oh. You're kind of pretty!

ESSIE puts her ear to the box and listens.

RAT stands above her and in turn whispers in her ear, inaudibly.

The boys look at one another and try to hide their conversation by the whiteboard as they play tic tac toe.

JON

Does she know?

DAVID

About what?

JON

About the law and stuff. The Serious Stuff like you said.

DAVID

... um not really? Mom and Dad don't really keep her in *the world* much. Too much brain poison they say.

"Arsenic on the airwaves" Dad says.

But I know, do you?

JON

Yes. I do.

DAVID

And if they find out do they really

JON

Yes. My mom's sister's daughter's teacher had one in her science classroom a couple years ago. They came right in during test period and strangled it in front of everyone, forced a pellet down its throat and carried it out by the tail.

DAVID

If they come here looking they might have bigger problems than that rat to kill.

Dad doesn't like people from the government on the property. And with him gone, you know, we are the men of the... house? Barn?

JON

So

DAVID

We defend it. Essie's only ten and she's not...

Unless you're pussy enough to run away like a little mouse. Boo hoo Jon's a mouse gonna git killed by a

JON punches DAVID in the arm.

JON

Shut up. I'm a better shot than you. At least my sister can use both her eyes. Oh and I win.

DAVID tackles JON to the ground and both boys wrestle in circles crashing through the door into the wind and noise of the generator. The door slams.

RAT stands up. ESSIE stands up. They face each other.

ESSIE
So I can hear you.

RAT
Yes you can.

ESSIE
And you are a rat.

RAT
Yes I am.

ESSIE
Then how come you know so much?

RAT
I feast on knowledge.
Noooo
I read. I watch and I remember. I chew right through most things and come out the other side full.
You know many things too. And you pay attention.

ESSIE
Oh

RAT
Have you ever had a teacher before?

ESSIE
No not really.

RAT
Good. A little secret, I've never had one either. But I'm one now.

ESSIE
A teacher? Are you safe?

RAT

What do you mean?

ESSIE

I've heard rats aren't safe. They're dirty and bring diseases.
But you don't look dirty.

RAT

I'm not going to hurt you kid. If that is what you are asking...
Is that what you're asking?

ESSIE

I'm not sure what... I'm saying that... it's just what I think I've been told.

RAT

Essie I'm going to ask you a question, a hard question-

ESSIE

You know my name

RAT

I listen - the boys are loud
The question is 'where are we'?

ESSIE

Here in the school room - in the barn

RAT

And the barn is

ESSIE

On the farm

RAT

And the farm is

ESSIE

On the land

RAT

Which is?

ESSIE

Um... just land? I know there's Jon's family's farm and town down the way, then there's a road

RAT

And that road goes?

ESSIE

Away

RAT

Away to where

ESSIE

Just away to more farms and towns I think. Somewhere there is a radio station where people talk and turn their voice into static.

RAT

And this land we are on, where is it?

ESSIE

On earth or it is the earth

RAT

Both

And where is earth

ESSIE

Uhhh here?

RAT

So then where are the stars then? Are they here too?

ESSIE

No they are in the sky like God or

ESSIE thinks for a while. The moment lingers a bit too long. Wind and a hum. RAT paces, a proud teacher, hunting for a way to write on the

whiteboard. ESSIE traces her finger on the ground. Looks at it and blows the dust away. She begins to take in the objects in the space, touching them, she takes a glance at the audience then whirls around to RAT.

RAT has been doodling on the whiteboard.

ESSIE

So you asked where the stars are, they are not here they are there.

RAT

Why? Why are we here and the stars there?

ESSIE

They are far away from us. The earth is big. The things on earth are big. I read about them.

I've never seen the ocean but there are Leviathans there.

RAT

No. I have seen the ocean.

There are no Leviathans there.

Or at least they are all dead now. Stinky humans kill em, like your boys.

ESSIE

They know killing is wrong.

And I know there are Lev/

RAT

/We'll see. A shame you can't leave here and see for yourself

ESSIE

Well there's a blizzard don't you know

RAT begins writing statements on the whiteboard.
There is a blizzard. There are no leviathans. The boys are stinky. We are on earth.

RAT

How is your eye? What if it got infected? Would you leave to see a doctor?

ESSIE

It's fine. I'll be fine.

RAT

If I rubbed my disgusting diseased rat body allllll over your eye and it swelled up to the size of a cantaloupe would you leave then?

ESSIE

...

RAT adds to the list. *Essie will never leave.*

RAT

The disease spreads to your brain. You can't talk. You can't read your stories or picture them in your head.

Your body shakes and the boys laugh at you.

You start to cry and you can't stop.

Flies buzz around your head.

And even then you would stay HERE.

ESSIE looks worriedly at the door and shivers.

She rubs her hand in her eye and blinks hard.

ESSIE

Ummmmm... but... the outside... out 'there'

RAT

Is what?

ESSIE shivers again and sits balled up on herself.

RAT prepares another lesson, finds a yardstick.

Story time.

RAT

In a town south of here, an old woman died in a house where she had lived for her entire life. This woman lived through hardship after hardship and so this house became the only place where she felt at home. She filled the house with beautiful things, flowered wallpaper, puppies, designer dress patterns, pictures of her great grandchildren, and all of her life's riches.

When the wallpaper faded she pasted fresh sheets on top. When puppies grew old she buried them in the backyard. When the dresses were no longer in style she folded the patterns and tucked them away. Eventually, when she died in her home, her grandchildren came to sort

through her life. However, they could not find any of her riches. The grandchildren did not see the beauty in the faded wallpaper or the wilting graves or the crumbling tissue paper. They wanted to abandon the house or worse exterminate it and bring in strangers to live in the walls. Her walls.

Books, dresses, and photographs flew into the dumpster in the front yard. I could not let this happen. Not this invasion and new occupation. Leave? The thought of it turned me feral.

Knowing this old woman all these years, I knew what might change the grandchildren's minds. She had kept a ledger of all her riches both monetary and material. I dragged it out of the dumpster and set it on the welcome mat. The grandchildren, astonished, started combing the house for these riches. Peeling wallpaper and dress pattern tissue sprouted dollar bills, tucked in tight. Yet, most, if not all of the treasure that the ledger documented remained lost.

Then the grandchildren remembered the dogs, buried haphazardly in the backyard. Decomposing for years, these bodies were a dreadful and perfume sight. The grandchildren dug and dug, pulling up bone and flesh and worm.

Those ungrateful pieces of shit stopped just a handful of dirt short of striking gold.

ESSIE

They stopped?

RAT

Would you like to reach your hand through the skull of a dead dog? I didn't think so. No riches for them. They sold the place. I came north. Forced out.

Bad for me, worse for her. That old woman lived in that house her whole life. Only death could force her out.

Essie you can't stay in one place forever. It's not possible.

ESSIE

Oh

RAT

You gotta keep moving.

ESSIE

But why?

RAT

For one you'll die. For two you'll be bored. For three you'll be lonely.

ESSIE

No I won't.

RAT

Oh who will keep you company? David? Your brother?

Oh he'll leave soon enough. Off to the mountains with Jon one day and he'll come back changed.

He'll keep moving, wrestling, slinging bullets.

And Jon will follow him like a loyal dog because it is all he knows. All he wants. You'll be alone. No mischief to speak of.

You'll

ESSIE

Stop. STOP!

You're scaring me.

RAT

You should be scared.

Being left out in the cold is dangerous. But you'd know all about that already.

Why don't you teach me something Essie.

She thinks. She snatches the marker from RAT. She writes in big uncoordinated letters on the board *A Argumnt for Staying Put*. She stands back. RAT corrects her spelling and grammar kindly. In mismatched handwriting it now reads *AN ArgumEnt for Staying Put*.

ESSIE clears her throat.

ESSIE

You asked where we are... we are in the barn on the farm. This is home.

My parents leave for supplies sometimes but other than that we all stay here. A family. The farm gives us what we need. We grow things and cook things. I go to the barn and read. I have some books. David shoots bottles for practice. I look at the stars and see the bright ones that must be the closest to earth. I understand what time the sun rises and sets. I picture Leviathans and little houses on the prairie and how I know lions sometimes travel in prides, like rats travel in packs. I'm happy here.

That's where I am. I am home.

So why would I leave?

I move enough staying put. Your advice is frankly stupid. You are scaring a child out of her home.

I stay put because love it here.

...

No, I really do!

RAT

Is that your argument? Love? Just love?

Is that ALL

ESSIE stares. Huffs.

RAT

How do you even know what love feels like my dear? Look at you.

It's RAT lecture time. Comically so.

How does one know what love feels like?

When any intelligent creature, like myself, experiences a sensation for the very first time, their brain forms connections, like beams holding up a roof of thoughts, or pegs on which to hang memories AND labels for these new sensations.

Sensations, for example, like love.

Yet, no matter how much your brain takes the lumber of experience and hammers out the pegs of memory... What you call love and what I call love are entirely different, built from different lumber on different land.

Your love, my love, David and Jon's loooove. All different see?

When you say you will *stay put* because you love it here, I don't know what your love means because it is different from mine.

So what is your love Essie?

Is that all YOU have for YOUR *ArgumEnt*?

ESSIE

My *ArgumEnt* is mine. Not yours.

And...

Yes love. Well... I'm comfortable here. Most of the time.

She rubs her red eye.

I'm warm and... fed

I guess

What else is there? I'm just a girl, I don't think I'm supposed to want to go out of my home.
There's "arsenic in the air" out there.

Here there's just apple seeds.

I mean I do have questions and the ocean seems nice but wanting those things seems like
wanting to touch the stars when the stars are there and not here.

Pretty-terribly-unlikely-to-happen.

And what would happen if I wasn't here, home.

What then?

The plants would die and the generator would go dead with no gas in it.

The animals, much less friendly than you, would run through the house and eat the bread flour
and the bedsheets.

Worse yet, what if SOMEONE were to come and take my home with no one here to stand up to
them? Like your old lady's house huh. Like that. You tried to stand up for it.

RAT

Tried. Failed.

Failed upward and outward and left behind some undiscovered treasure that wasn't even mine to
begin with.

The house was the home of the old woman, not mine.

ESSIE

And if I wasn't at home in this barn then you would be freezing out in the storm right now. If you
keep scaring me with your questions Rat I'll throw you right back outside where you came.

RAT stares at her, doubting her threat.

Ooooooaaayy so yes I wouldn't really put you outside. In the storm. That would be a cruel and
horrible way to die.

And I still think you are, in a way, beautiful?

And for me maybe I guess beauty is a kind of love

RAT

How wonderful for you to think that.

A pause.

I don't think you're telling the truth.

I know I am not a beautiful thing so you must be lying.

You caught me in the warm light of a warm barn in a box when I am fresh washed from the
snow.

I know in the dark you would not see me like you see me now.

ESSIE

Don't say that. You're worth... You say things ... well not beautiful things... but you say things that make me build a barn in my brain.

The barn is beautiful I think so therefore

There is a loud clang. The lights go out. Only RAT's eyes glow.

RAT

Pop quiz Essie

ESSIE

What's that

RAT

A small test given unexpectedly.

ESSIE

Alright, and the sound

Rat?

What was that sound?

David?

Jon?

David?!

God please I was just trying to save a poor creature and maybe rats seem dirty but all creatures

The sound of skittering feet. Disturbing chittering as if from a rat, or many.

Stopit

Please

Something seems to run over ESSIE's feet. She jumps and screams.

Stop this isn't funny

The Radio switches on, becoming a battery operated pinprick of light. It wails between snippets of music

and broadcast. Crescendo. Snippets of *Peter and the Wolf*, ads for security systems, weather report of an ice storm, a report on a recent scientific discovery, a message from a concerned mother etc.

ESSIE

God please. I just wanted to save it. To have something to myself and if that was selfish I'll

Another skitter and something big falls in the room. It is almost as if RAT is doing foley for a haunted house filled only with rodents. Some of the sounds are amplified and played through the radio speaker.

Rat!

Stopit please

You're scaring me

Turn the lights on please? Just put everything back and we can go on. You can tell me more about the ocean, about dead dogs, about David and Jon's love, about buried gold and how you aren't beau

Suddenly DAVID bursts through the door, letting in the wind. He is visibly mussed, shivering violently, and carrying a camping lantern and some flashlights.

DAVID

Essie are you ok!

The generator, we broke, I mean

I couldn't find matches

Wait

Who are you talking to? Essie?!

RAT

Oh just me

DAVID swings the lamp violently. The light wobbles and casts moving shadows.

RAT

Nice to meet you David. I'm Essie's

ESSIE

Friend. My friend. My teacher!

DAVID

You're a rat.

RAT

Yes

DAVID

A talking rat.

Oh

Oh

His shivers grow more visible and he looks around for something in the room, tossing school things aside.

DAVID

Essie quick the coats. If we are both seeing things the cold it's gone too far and we'll be

ESSIE

No no no Rat is real.

David REAL.

And not like a demon or anything. Actually I think Rat is very beautiful

RAT

I disagree.

DAVID

Somehow I agree with... it...

You're strange for seeing the appeal sister

But the coats

ESSIE

Yes here!

It is getting a bit cold I think

Rat do you want a mitten to snuggle with?

RAT nods and accepts a tossed mitten from the pile of colorful winterware. The clothes appear worn and threadbare.

RAT

Ahh

DAVID

So... Rat, You're my sister's teacher yes?

RAT

We've been teaching one another yes

DAVID

Well I am sorry to say that TEACHERS aren't really allowed here. Not on this property. Not in this barn. So you'll have to go.

ESSIE

No!

DAVID

Essie... you know what we know about TEACHERS, they bring poison and rot with them and infect your facts with new ideas.

Look see.

A lie.

Leviathans are real. And alive.

DAVID walks over to the board and crosses off the *no* in the statement *There are no leviathans*.

ESSIE

But Rat said its seen the ocean and

DAVID

Do you really believe a stranger?

Over me your brother. We have all the wisdom and truth right here. The land and God will give us what we need to know. That is all. No more and no less.

ESSIE

When did you get so high and mighty Mr. shoot eye

DAVID

Stop

ESSIE

Or what you'll hit my other eye and I'll go proper blind huh?

Realllll brotherly love right there.

Realllll “phillia” huh

RAT

He’s right. Some teachers are poison.

Some are not. Knowing who is who and which is which. That’s the issue the problem

But believe me, more than anything I just want to stay here, wait out this storm is all.

Yes Essie, yes I just did say I wanted to stay here. In your home.

I acquiesce to your *ArgumEnt for Staying Put*.

A plus.

DAVID

She doesn’t know you Rat. She doesn’t know how TEACHERS sometimes invite strange company. Arsenic air.

ESSIE

I don’t know what... What’s acquiesce?

DAVID

You know what a girl needs to know. No more. No less.

Trust me.

I’ll protect you.

When the storm is gone Rat, you get out or I will get you out.

DAVID grabs ESSIE in a tight and forced hug. He tries to be protecting. Instead he is holding her prisoner.

RAT

Either me or you buddy.

Out out out.

DAVID begins bundling himself then ESSIE into scarves, hats, and gloves. ESSIE, having given one of her mittens to RAT, has one hand exposed to the air.

All are cold and the last leftover heat from the generator is leaking through the barn walls.

DAVID

We need to move now

RAT
He's right

DAVID
We need to move to keep warm.
I think Jon's still out there. He can't make it home.
If he's not back in an hour we should...
Look I couldn't even get to the house Essie.
Your new friend here may be fun and intriguing but unless we can stay warm, maybe start a fire,
it's not going to be pretty.
And I couldn't find matches.
So
No fire.

RAT
Shit.
We gotta move. Look for fire starters and move.

RAT hunches to tune the radio. Wind and static.
Then unnaturally clear. Synths and a beat.

Oh my students. Wow.
They dance so brilliantly.

ESSIE and DAVID start searching for fire starters.
They toss books and papers in the center of the stage. A sibling handshake of sorts begins to emerge which ESSIE teaches to RAT. The handshake turns into a choreographed dance. Flashlights are passed around and playfully move through the air. Their scarves act as ribbons and jump ropes.

In this moment RAT is the fun teacher on the playground and the children are at school for the first time in their lives. Maybe a game of three square or kickball breaks out. At one point, when DAVID pulls out the toy gun to play with, RAT

takes it as a scolding principle would confiscate a dangerous toy. It is put away somewhere safe.

All are warming, panting, and smiling. DAVID is watching RAT closely with suspicion but the childlike need for recess pulls DAVID back into the small fantasy playground these three have created together. It is a public access PSA, a sitcom, and a colorful children's cartoon on stage.

It is above all else FUN.

RAT yells above the music.

RAT

What if I told you that beyond that door are answers to every question?

AND if you think a question that's never been think before you can look it up, study it, research it, find it out!

Wouldn't that be amazing!

They continue to dance and move with unbridled childhood joy.

ESSIE and DAVID

Yeah!

RAT

Learning is fun!

ESSIE and DAVID

Yeah!

RAT

Being wrong is okay!

ESSIE and DAVID

Yea/Wha

RAT

That's right! You gotta be wrong to be right
Sooooometimes

ESSIE

Okay!

DAVID

No no no
We're just having fun right?

RAT

Believe me, David, the core truth you need to learn is how to let go! Be free David.

DAVID

Of what!

RAT

The self you want so desperately to be but absolutely are not!
Yes yes yes THAT one

ESSIE

What

RAT

Your brother has a love different than ours, remember?
Oh David! Let go! Don't you see he loves you!

DAVID

Shut the
Hell
Up

DAVID takes a swing with a punch at RAT. RAT dodges and they begin to fight. ESSIE tries to find a way in between them.

In the middle of the fight no one notices the door crack open.

JON enters. A small whistle of wind. As he enters the room and is noticeably shivering, he awkwardly adjusts (and tries to to hide) a palm sized object tucked into his waistband under his sweater. His head is bowed and he is visibly deflated.

He closes the door and slides down the wall in heap. He wears his scarf and sweater, no coat, no hat. He rubs his ears and puts his fingers in his armpits.

He yawns. Jon is starting to show the first signs of hypothermia.

DAVID

Essie get out of my way

ESSIE

No you can't hurt Rat

Please we were having fun

DAVID

That Rat is poison. Essie let me at it.

Essie please.

The song ends. The radio fades to static and snippets. Against the static, JON's breathing is audible and concerning.

The next two conversations happen overlapping one another, as DAVID goes to talk to JON and cautiously help him up while ESSIE pulls RAT aside.

DAVID

Oh Jon thank God you're back

JON

Couldn't make it to my folk's place.

Found some matches after you left the shed David.

Couldn't come back without them cuz ya know

Then I saw some lights on the road, headed our way.
Don't think it is our folks, their trucks couldn't make it in this weather. I think it's government.
County.
Wellness check or rangers on report.

ESSIE

You alright? My brother can be... that way about... some things

RAT

I'm fine. Bruised tail. Essie, I'm serious we need to keep moving.

ESSIE and RAT start moving in place. ESSIE half heartedly and RAT forcing up her pace.

ESSIE

Uh I'm not stupid
What don't I know that you two do?

RAT

It won't make you happy

ESSIE

I just had fun. So I don't need to be happy for a while.

DAVID

You think they know to check the barn. We've got some light in here, but other than that, just looks like a barn from the outside.

JON

Yeah but I'm worried because THAT thing is still here
Looks like your sister's gotten attached to the scabby shit

ESSIE

Please tell me

JON

Matches weren't all I found
Wanna see

DAVID

Right yeah okay

RAT

Number one.

Your brother loves Jon, love loves him in a kind of love that's a new peg in both their barns.

DAVID

Whoa. Is it real real?

Didn't know there was one stashed back there.

Loaded?

JON

Yeah a couple in there

RAT

And Number two.

I, me, Rat, am wrong. Or at least I'm against the law. Rats are banned in this part of the world you know. Punishment for long ago crime.

And if the right, or rather, the wrong people see me I'm arseniced out of existence.

Bye to me and all the barns in my brain too.

ESSIE

Stop talking in circles

RAT

I'm dead if anyone with power sees me.

Ha

Don't rat me out okay?

ESSIE

Oh yeah

What's "rat out"

RAT

To rat out means to tell on. Give up the ghost. Pony up. Snitch.

No one likes a snitch. And most people don't like rats

ESSIE

Oh

DAVID

Careful with it. If they come up here in their big truck we may have to use it. Parent's made sure Essie's not on the books. Never even seen a doctor. Don't want her to be ya know

JON

Oh they'd really

DAVID

Take her yeah... I think they would. I'm not sure but that's what I've been told.

DAVID glances at RAT and ESSIE having their moment. He gently pats JON on the shoulder.

DAVID gives JON his hat.

JON gives DAVID a knowing smile and stands to his full height somewhat guarding the door.

DAVID

Thanks Jon

JON

Does she really think that rat is talking to her?

DAVID

That's the thing I think it talks to everyone, all of us at least.

Maybe it's the cold.

JON

Oh yeah.

We should try to start a fire.

If we get hungry maybe we could roast it for food.

DAVID

Essie would kill you for that I think.

RAT

I heard the word fire.

The two pairs merge in the middle, having had their separate revelations. The radio is silent. ESSIE's eyes grow wide watching the boys' every move.

RAT

Fire or move boys. Pick your poison.

DAVID

Paper, we need paper.

Things to burn.

Essie I'm so sorry.

DAVID begins to move towards ESSIE who is now clutching her copy of *The Long Winter* to her chest. DAVID prys it out of her hands. She lets out a whimper.

DAVID then takes a large book out of the burn pile and sets it on the table behind. The book looks to be a large Bible.

ESSIE snatches *The Long Winter* from the pile again.

DAVID

Essie? We need it

ESSIE

Just one page.

DAVID

Go ahead.

RAT

Which one? I am sooo curious.

ESSIE looks through the book and flips to a midpoint. She carefully rips a page out and tosses the book back on the burn pile. During this

conversation they are ripping up paper into very very small pieces of tinder.

RAT

Good choice. Wilder. Such a classic for young readers.

You know boys burning books doesn't have the greatest reputation but moral allowances must be made for those on the precipice of freezing to death.

JON

Oh mmm

ESSIE

Death

RAT

Yes death

Are you scared of it?

ESSIE

Not really? I think I've got some answers for what happens after... I think I'm pretty set.

But I'm... I don't think I've ever thought about how much it happens.

RAT

As far back as time goes

ESSIE

When was it happening the most?

RAT

You mean what was the deadliest time in history?

ESSIE

I'm mean I'm more interested in numbers. I'm just caught on the bigness of it. Death. The numbers of the dead.

Dead dead dead.

RAT

You've gone more morbid than a rat. Congratulations on facing your mortality. Let's see... numbers numbers

JON

I think it was in the Dark Ages

RAT

Oh Jon you're joining us for class how wonderful!

JON

Uhh

DAVID

Honestly I think you know more than I do about

JON

Uhh yeah there was a plague that killed a bunch of people. Almost the whole world I think.

And

It was rats' fault.

Sorry

RAT

Not mine. Oh no no. Those were my cousins to the east. And they themselves weren't causing the death, they were just carriers. Little grim reapers every one.

JON

I think it was millions

RAT

Correct. An estimated 25 million.

Everyone knew someone who died of it or if not they died of it themselves.

DAVID

That's a lot of death.

JON

Yeah

JON finally pulls out the packet of matches. The paper on the outside practically crumbles as he holds out his hand.

A sharp, knowing, intake of breath from both DAVID and RAT. ESSIE and JON are clueless. DAVID yells and kicks the table, knocking over the radio which begins to blare loud angry music and feedback. Frantically DAVID looks at JON and they rush to try to turn the radio off. It takes too long.

DAVID gives the radio one last kick.

Silence.

RAT remains a patient teacher.

RAT

Essie? What do you need to make a fire.

ESSIE

Umm something to burn?

RAT

Fuel

ESSIE

Air, I know you can put a glass over a candle and it will go out without the air

RAT

That's oxygen.

And the third thing?

ESSIE

Uhhh

DAVID

It's heat

Fukin heat

RAT

That is correct David. And Jon, what would prevent a fire from catching.

JON is starting to recognize the danger.

JON

Not enough heat so like if the fuel had water on it or

RAT

These
are
wet matches.

ESSIE

Oh. OH.

So no fire.

They stand shivering in silence staring at the wet matches on the floor.

There is a knock at the door. Even with the instinct to shiver, everyone freezes.

KNOCK.

Silence.

KNOCK. KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

JON approaches the door, listening, his hand at his waistband. JON looks to DAVID. DAVID nods and silently steps in front of ESSIE who steps in front of RAT.

Silence then...

THE MAN

Hello? Anyone in there?

I'm from the county governance, if you are able please open the door.

I noticed

The kids inside and RAT whisper.

DAVID

Just one you think?

JON

He said "I" so probably

THE MAN

This property and the next one over lost power. I understand there are children present on the property?

Hello?

I picked up radio signal from inside this barn and heard loud unusual noises. I'm declaring I have just cause to enter without an invitation.

One more time, anyone home?

ESSIE

Oh no they want Rat

They are going to kill Rat... they are going to come in here and ruin everything for us

DAVID

Essie shush

ESSIE

Rat please please please don't leave me

JON

Invaders

RAT

It's not/that simple

DAVID

/It always is like mom and dad said... outsiders are poison

ESSIE

That's what they say about Rat

DAVID

Rat isn't an outsider its inside with us

I need to protect you Es

Family

Home

THE MAN

If I don't gain entry and a child dies in there you will have blood on your hands wherever you are.

ESSIE

Please Please David

Do Something

ESSIE raises her voice louder and louder as she paces and cries. DAVID attempts to remain a whisper.

Rat's not human

Rat can't die

Rat's don't know God. Can't be forgiven for 25 million deaths! Punished for nothing?

God! It's not fair!

David do something!

RAT

That's not...

DAVID

Shut up Es please!

THE MAN

I hear you. You also seem to be in possession of some sort of rat, against our territory's laws. I am coming in with a weap/

ESSIE

/NO!

All in the same moment the world shifts as the barn schoolroom is invaded.

RAT grabs ESSIE and throws her behind.

RAT leaps to the table and stands atop holding the Bible above their head.

DAVID and JON rush the door and push outside. JON fumbles in his waistband. The boys disappear

offstage. THE MAN grunts. The wind howls.
ESSIE cowers.

A moment of tense struggle offstage. RAT takes a breath and drops the large Bible onto the floor creating the sound of a gun firing. The wind fades.

DAVID and JON return with a smattering of blood on their faces. Everyone stands too still for too long in stunned silence.

DAVID

Essie, he didn't have any matches on him. His truck is frozen up. I'm so sorry.

DAVID collapses by the door. ESSIE stands shocked. RAT picks up the Bible and sets it neatly back on the table.

JON rushes over to the pile of papers where the wet matches are. He has two tiny objects in his hand that he keeps trying to hit together over and over and over, desperately praying for a spark.

JON

Come on

DAVID

No use. Everything is too wet.

JON

We could dance again

JON goes over to the radio and tries to turn it on. Nothing. Silence. DAVID's kicks broke its tenuous signal.

RAT

We're never gonna dance again. Ha can't feel my paws. No tail either.

We're in for it children.

So sorry its ending like this. Boy and Boy and Girl and Rat against nature.

What an odd conflict?

If you want to last, boys and girls, huddle together.

Warmth with the pack.

All three children lay down together, attempting to share warmth.

To JON and DAVID -

You two get close. You need the heat.

Closer.

Closer.

Ok here is what is going to happen. You start to shiver, but we've gone past that now. Then you feel confused and fumble your hands.

You begin to slur your speech and lose your memory.

Maybe that is best for you boys. Don't want to die remembering being a murderer I suppose.

Then you begin to /

DAVID and JON, realizing how close they have become, begin talking over RAT, mostly to themselves. It is harsh, delirious language getting to their inner self hate. This conversation repeats until the end of RAT's line (denoted by *)

Over this time JON and DAVID drift apart little by little. RAT notices. They both suffer more and more frostbite the further away they become.

[DAVID]

/No you - Get away from me you fag.

[JON]

You away from me.

[DAVID]

God hates fags.

[JON]

No I thought it was God says fags.

[DAVID]

Away

...

Jon

...

Jon... you there?

[JON]

Yeah

Should I come back or

RAT paces. RAT does not notice the lack of mitten on ESSIE's hand. RAT is beginning to grow delirious.

RAT

Fall asleep. A sure death sentence.

You fall asleep and frost bite eats your limbs, your heart, your brain.

Stick together please. I'm trying to save you because

If a rat doesn't get forgiven I mean frozen they can survive

Rats and men

They can be friends

Frozen friends

Who love

You know upside is if you're rescued a person has been resuscitated up to 40 minutes after death, made possible by the deep frozen state. Just the weather keeping your body on ice boys.*

It's cold

I'm cold

... I feel warm....

RAT starts talking in a mad sing song way. The boys have stopped moving.

Seeing your breath means danger cold

Seeing your breath means you're alive

Seeing means you have eyes

Seeing your breath means danger cold

Seeing your breath means you're alive

Seeing means you have eyes
And
You get closer.
Too far. Let go of ideas.
It's all just warmth now.
Always been.
Cold's just the absence of heat you know.
That's true that's true
Science science
There's humans and rats and not quite humans and not quite rats.
Have been. Will be.
Found a pinkie in ice ya know. Always was what she was.

Oh
No
Essie your mitten.

RAT drops the mitten in the box where ESSIE first trapped them. RAT then slumps in a corner.

Time passes. A lot of time for onstage time. Maybe the camping light flickers and burns out to just a small dim glow.

ESSIE
I think this is my pinkie. Hah I think it came off. Look Rat look!
Rat?
RaT?!
RAT?!!
My pinkie's come off!

Out of morbid curiosity she licks it. She puts it in her mouth and bites down. She sticks out her tongue.

Ick. Gross.

RAT watches from a dark corner. Essie doesn't see them. She begins to hum and waltz to herself. She tries to turn on the radio. She hits in over and over

with her ungloved hand. It does not turn on. She pulls out the paper she saved from *The Long Winter*. She squints in the darkness and in slurred speech sings. Rat sings along with her until the last chorus.

ESSIE and RAT

“When Paul and Silas bound in jail,
Do thy self no harm,
One did sing and the other did pray,
Do thy self no harm,
We’re all here, We’re all here,
Do thy self no harm,
We’re all here, We’re all here,
Do thy self no harm,
If religion was a thing that money could buy,
Do thy self no harm,
The rich would live and the poor would die,
Do thy self no harm,

ESSIE

We’re all here, We’re all here,
Do thy self no harm,
We’re all here...”

She is stumbling now. She can not feel her limbs or toes so she waltzes like a zombie would waltz.

She continues to move and sing until she trips over the box that she trapped RAT in in the first place. She loses her grip on her finger and it flies across the room. She pulls something vaguely furry out of the box and it sits limp in her gloved and bloody hands. Her voice is horse and low.

ESSIE

Rat? Why aren’t you moving?

She yawns. Her eyes droop. The wind grows louder. ESSIE is the last to fall asleep. The wind continues to howl. All the children lay bundled and still.

Time passes. RAT slowly moves forward to the edge of the playing space, stepping over the bodies of the children. The wind and music abruptly stop. The space shifts and is no longer a quite schoolroom in a barn.

While RAT faces the audience, the actors playing the children begin to take off their winterwear and leave it in piles, resembling the bodies of the children. Slowly they begin to reset the space to what it was at the top of the play. They put away the books, erase the whiteboard, and pick up the paper debris.

Eventually they sit next to RAT. RAT walks to the bell on the wall and rings it three times. Rings it again. Rings it again. RAT checks out the door to see if the kids are coming to lesson. They are not.

RAT turns on the radio and turns to write on the whiteboard. A list The actors grab markers of their own and write. It reads some version of the following:

Things You Can't Ignore

An Argument for Learning Some then Staying Put

You can't ignore:

Cold

A crying baby

The plague

The sound of a school bell

God

A supernova

Death

Teeth falling out

Hunger

Ignorance

Time

... the list continues on. End of Play.

References etc.

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