King Rat

When Caroline’s mother had announced that she was taking Skye to the ballet, Caroline had felt a curious sense of déjà vu. She had remembered when she had gone with her mother to see *The Nutcracker* as a child. Afterwards, she had demanded tutus and dolls and ballet lessons. She had thought that Skye would do the same.

She had not expected the rats.

Everyone had told Caroline that having children was exhausting, but she hadn’t really understood. How could it be any worse than school, than grinding away at a dead-end job? Than holding her father’s hand as cancer ate him up?

As terrible as it was to think, much less to say, Caroline suspected that what was really exhausting about Skye was that the girl was not her own. She was her husband’s eight-year-old child from his dead first wife. It was the last day of winter break. Caroline could not wait for it to be over, and she had only just started to make pancakes for herself and Skye.

“He’s almost here! What do you think of that! He’s coming tonight! He’s King Rat!” Skye sang.

“He’s not coming,” Caroline said, viciously flipping a pancake. “He’s not coming because he is not real.”

“He is too real! He talks to me and sings to me, and he told me he’s coming tonight.”

“Skye, there isn’t a King Rat. It’s a Mouse King, remember? The Mouse King is the one who attacks Clara.”

“Well this isn’t some old no-good Mouse King. This is King Rat.”
Caroline rubbed her temples then poured another pancake.

"He’s coming, and he’s taking us away!” Skye said. She had a tragic, languishing look, with her dark, melting eyes and her smooth olive skin. Her dark hair fell in glossy waves. She was wearing a midnight-blue dress shot through with streaks of silver from a high-end department store across town, and she didn’t even have the decency to rumple it or dirty it like a normal child. She looked more like a doll than a girl.

Caroline, remembering her own childhood, how impoverished she had been, how hard she had fought to get this life of affluence, sometimes, felt kinship with wicked stepmothers everywhere.

“When your father comes home, he’s putting an end to this nonsense,” she said without conviction. She had said the same thing for days, but Skye was too fascinated by the idea of a rat—a King Rat—as big as a person who danced and pranced and fought, and told bad jokes, and said, in a high, squeaky voice, that Skye and her stepmother were the prettiest girls in the whole wide world, and how would Skye like to be a princess?

“Why a rat, Skye?” Caroline asked. “Why not a mouse?”

“Because he’s not a mouse; he’s a rat!” Skye said, rolling her eyes. “He’s King Rat! He’s King Rat! Bigger than the biggest cat! Tall and giant, but not fat! King Rat! King Rat!” she sang.

Beneath Skye’s chant, Caroline heard a furtive skitter from the basement. As if summoned by Skye’s infatuation, the rats had appeared soon after The Nutcracker, scuttling about the basement and sneaking into the kitchen at night. She heard them when Phil lay dead asleep beside her and ground her teeth against the sounds, afraid to go down there, afraid the rats would come upstairs, ashamed of herself and her fears. Where was
the girl who, when confronted by a rattlesnake, chopped its head off with a shovel?
Where was the girl who had danced, driven by a strength and determination which flingt
Skye could never understand? When had her strong hands become these wilting things,
clutching uselessly after a child that was not her own? When had she become incapable
even of catching rats?

Of course, she had set traps, but these rats were too clever. No matter what she
did the previous evening, no matter how cunningly she disguised or hid or baited the
traps, each morning she went down to the basement to find them all sprung, the bait
missing, and a handful of rat droppings scattered contemptuously about the floor.
Sometimes, the rats were bold, and the droppings were in the kitchen, hiding under the
toaster or on top of the fridge. She had started getting up before Phil so that she could
clean everything up before he saw it.

She handed Skye her plate of pancakes.

“He’s really real, and he’s really coming.”

“If the ballet is going to make you believe such silly things, then I definitely can’t
let you go anymore,” Caroline said.

Skye rolled her eyes again. “It’s not the ballet. He just came right after the ballet.”
She took the pancakes out of the kitchen, into the dining room.

At four o’clock, Caroline poured herself a generous helping of wine, swirling it in
a finely-crafted wine glass that she and Phil had chosen together during their first,
happier year of marriage half a decade ago. When she was a poor dumb teenager, she’d
only been able to get that cheap wine which was simultaneously too bitter and too sweet,
but still she’d relished the look of wine in a glass, dark red like a child’s dream of blood. She loved the way it felt in her mouth, slipping into the narrow spaces between her teeth before caressing her tongue and brightening her eyes and cheeks. She didn’t need to use blush on days when she drank.

Just three big glasses, she thought. One now, one with dinner, and one after.

An hour later, she was just starting to relax and enjoy herself when Skye walked into the kitchen.

“Mom?”

She stiffened guiltily. She still felt like she had usurped the dead woman’s role every time her stepdaughter called her Mom. She turned to face Skye.

“Yes?”

“Is it true that you hate the ballet because you used to be a dancer, but now you can’t anymore?”

Caroline saw the wine slosh in its glass, held by her unsteady hand.

“Who told you that?”

“Grandma.”

Of course. Her mother. Caroline’s birth had ended her mother’s career as a dancer, and bad luck had ended Caroline’s chances, and now her mother felt no compunction about turning everyone, even her stepdaughter, against her. Anger steadied her hand. She took another sip of wine, letting it settle on her tongue like a warm, lazy cat before swallowing.

“Grandma’s right,” she said.

“What happened?” Skye asked.
A single, careless moment. One moment at the end of ten years of dedication and discipline. It might have been bearable if it had been her own carelessness. She might have loathed herself for several years and then moved on with her life. But it had been someone else’s carelessness: her dance partner’s. And though Caroline thought that she forgave people very readily for careless mistakes or words, she had found that she could not forgive the man—then more a boy than a man—who had dropped her, shattering her knee, her ankle, and her life. Her bones had not healed right, and though she could walk without discomfort or irregularity, she could not dance. The boy had sailed away from the wreckage, away to a life in New York as a successful dancer.

More than the boy, she could not forgive the universe for showing her the dizzying heights laid open to someone who devoted herself completely to an art, for showing her how control and discipline could forge her raw natural talent into a fine-edged thing of strength and grace, only to snatch it away.

“The man I was dancing with dropped me,” Caroline told Skye. Her glass was almost empty. So was the wine bottle.

“Oh,” said Skye. She thought for a moment. “King Rat won’t drop you when you dance with him.”

Caroline stared at her stepdaughter for a few seconds before bursting into laughter which, if not warm, wasn’t quite bitter. King Rat wouldn’t drop her!

She had finished her glass of wine. Had it been her second glass? Her third?

She had a sudden image of King Rat looming larger and bulkier and more bestial than the Mouse King. She saw him standing on hind legs and bowing to her. She saw herself gliding into a graceful curtsey and holding out her arms.
King Rat would take one hand in his own paw and slide his other around her
narrow waist. She would reach her other arm up, up, up, her fingers burrowing into the
fur of his shoulder. She would feel the beating of his heart—fast, faster than a human’s
heart, more like the purring of an engine than the adagio pulse of a drum.

“Mom?” Skye asked uncertainly as Caroline began to waltz around the kitchen,
humming to herself. “What are you doing?”

“Dancing with King Rat,” she said. “I can see him. I can see his bright, black
eyes, no white, no pupil. Eerie cunning, to evade all my traps!”

She put the glass down and grasped Skye’s hands, swinging her in a wide and
erratic waltz about the kitchen.

“We’re reflected in those liquid eyes, like dolls’ eyes. No, you’re the doll with the
doll’s eyes. I’m the wicked stepmother, and he’s King Rat.”

“His teeth are as long as my forearm! His tail swishes and thumps behind him!”
said Skye, smiling as they waltzed.

“Look at his tail!” Caroline said, giggling.

“His whiskers tickle my cheeks when he leans down and sings to me in a high
squeaky voice, like this!” Skye squeaked. “Look at me! I’m King Rat! Bigger than the
biggest cat! I dance with all the pretty dolls, and not one breaks, not one falls!”

As she spun Skye around the kitchen, laughing, Caroline felt as if ten years had
melted away. Her ankle no longer strained when she turned. Her knee no longer stiffened.
She was young again, almost as young as Skye, giggling with her, singing her silly
rhymes with her.

“He’s going to make me a princess!” Skye shouted.
“He’s going to make me a queen!” Caroline shouted back.

She spun Skye so suddenly that the girl went spinning across the kitchen. Possessing none of Caroline’s grace or balance, Skye whirled like a poorly balanced top, slamming into the kitchen table and falling to the ground. The two of them stared at each other. After a minute, Skye slowly got up and left the room, limping slightly. Caroline pressed her slightly swollen fingers against her flushed face. She wanted to call after Skye, but she wasn’t sure what she could say, and her tongue was heavy and useless in her mouth.

“It’s okay!” Skye called from the hall. “I’m fine! It was an accident. I won’t tell Dad!”

Caroline’s heart seized with warmth for the girl, trying so hard to protect her, but she still found her tongue useless, unable to reply. She sighed, sinking to the floor. She would take a few moments to pull herself together, then she would start dinner.

By dinner time, Caroline was herself again. She carved and served the roast, waiting for Phil to approve it. When he took a bite and nodded, her palms tingled with relief and she smiled. After several years, her persistence in learning to cook had paid off, and Phil finally got what he wanted—his first wife’s cooking in a younger woman’s body.

Caroline watched Phil eat out of the corner of her eye. He was not so old, really, and she thought that men’s faces were more cunning at hiding age than women’s, or at turning age into an advantage to be bragged about. He had a strong square jaw and a pair
of high cheekbones to match. His hair was a dark blond, really more like tarnished brass than blond, with grey just beginning to come in at the temples. When they stood side by side, he towered over her.

Phil loved the difference in their heights and their builds, and often softened when Caroline asked him to open a pickle jar or get a box down from a high shelf. Any reminder of her delicacy made him smile fondly at her. He rewarded her weakness with everything she could ever want.

When Phil finished eating, she was ready to take his plate into the kitchen and start the decaf coffee for the grownups and the hot chocolate for Skye. Cups of warmth, Caroline’s mother had told her, are a substitute for happiness.

“So, what did my girls get up to today?” asked Phil.

“We went shopping for a few things and had a nice day at home.”

“A quiet day, how lovely,” said Phil wistfully.

Caroline wondered if she should add that it had not been exactly quiet or exactly lovely.

“King Rat’s coming tonight,” Skye said.

“So, King Rat talked to my little dancer today?” Phil asked.

“Not today. Last night. He only comes at night.”

“Well, rats aren’t fond of daylight.” He looked over at Caroline. “Do we have any of those Danish butter cookies?”

“Yes, but don’t have too many. The doctor—”

“Caroline, I’m not going to give up a few cookies a week because some doctor tells me to.”
“I just think—”

“You, on the other hand, well, I understand you ladies need to watch what you eat.” He winked at Skye who laughed. Caroline went to the kitchen and returned with the cookies. She refilled his coffee before he had to ask her to. He smiled vaguely at her before turning back to Skye.

“What does the Rat King look like?” he asked.

“King Rat’s as tall as you are, but he’s got a tail and big sharp claws, like a wolf’s and sharp, long teeth, like a lion’s. He’s got black glittery eyes. He stands like this,” Skye stood up and held her hands tucked in front of her, imitating a rat on its hind legs, “and he has a high squeaky voice!”

Phil laughed at Skye’s high, squeaky voice.

Caroline felt uneasy. Had she heard a furtive shuffle from the basement?

“Will you miss me when King Rat takes us away?” Skye asked.

“Where are you going? A nice vacation to the New York subways?” Phil asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Well,” Phil said, pretending to be grave, “I will definitely miss you.” He ate a cookie.

“Well, remember that I shall be a princess. You don’t have to be sad.”

“You’re already a princess,” Phil said, eating another cookie.

The cookies were pure butter and sugar. Caroline wondered how many cookies he would eat before she could recapture the tin and safely return it to the kitchen.

“No, a real princess,” Skye insisted. “With a crown made of all the prettiest stones and a dress made of silk and spider webs. And the rats will have to do everything I say.”
“Is that so? You’ll be the most successful exterminator in the world!” Phil turned to Caroline and took another cookie. “She can take care of those rats you can’t seem to outsmart.” He turned to Skye and tickled her stomach until she squirmed and giggled.

“We can pay her in sunshine and moonbeams.”

“I’ll miss you when we’re gone, daddy,” Skye said.

Her face was too solemn. Again, Caroline had the uncanny sense that she could see Skye’s face as it would look, perhaps ten years in the future, when tragedy first sank into her soul. It happens early for some girls, Caroline thought. It happened early for my mother. It happened early for me. Caroline felt a sudden compulsion to reach out to Skye, pull her into an embrace, and tell her that everything would be alright. Tragedy shatters a dream or delusion, but there will always be others, waiting to be shattered in their turn.

“We?” Phil asked.

“King Rat’s taking Mom and me,” said Skye. “Mom’s going to be a real queen with a necklace of rubies and a dress made of black ravens’ feathers and a little fur cape. She’s going to have a crown full of diamonds.”

“What nonsense! Did your grandmother tell you that?” Caroline said, blushing. She didn’t know why she was blushing. Perhaps it was all the wine she’d had with dinner. Perhaps it was the ridiculousness of a dress made of ravens’ feathers.

“Don’t blame this on your mother, too,” snapped Phil. He turned back to Skye.

“Tell me more about this King Rat and how you know him.”

“He comes into my room at night and sings in a squeaky voice.” said Skye. “He has a little cape with stars on it, and he carries a sword.”
Caroline’s left eyelid twitched, a nervous habit she’d never been able to shake. She heard a scuffle quite near, in the china hutch behind her. Was there a rat creeping among her china plates, eavesdropping on their conversation?

“He sings: Look at me! I’m King Rat! I’m bigger than the biggest cat. I’m fiercer than the vampire bat. Now what do you think of that? I live in a castle with golden halls, and give the very bestest balls. I dance with all the pretty dolls and not one breaks—not one falls.”

“Well, Caroline, who is King Rat?” Phil demanded. His hand twitched irritably, clenching and unclenching. His Adam’s apple bobbed and strained within his throat.

Caroline blinked. “In The Nutcracker? There’s The Mouse King—”

“Dammit, Caroline, you know what I mean!” said Phil, slamming both his hands on the table. “Who’s this guy that’s been telling my daughter that he’s going to make her a princess?”

Caroline had nothing to say, but Phil’s irritation made her nervous: she had to do something. She grabbed the lid to the cookie tin with her right hand, reaching for the cookie tin with her left. Phil defiantly dropped his hand into the tin, snatching a handful of cookies. Caroline found herself bringing the lid down on his hand as hard as she could, pinching his fingers and tearing a jagged line in the pad of his thumb before he could jerk his hand away. Several drops of blood fell on the cookies and the tablecloth.

Skye stopped singing. Caroline stopped breathing. She thought she heard the rats scurrying in the basement, gleeful and enthused by Skye’s song about their king and the smell of blood. The scurrying was strange, almost rhythmic.
“Please don’t fight! I won’t go with King Rat. I don’t need to be a princess. I don’t want to go!” said Skye.

Clutching his hand, Phil got up from the table and left the room, shooting Caroline a disgusted look as he did so.

They’re dancing, Caroline realized, breathing again. The rats in the basement are dancing.

Even when Phil was furious at her, even when he was on the brink of accusing her of infidelity, he wanted to sleep with her. Tonight was no different. In the darkness, Caroline felt more like the recipient of his anger than his wife. She didn’t really mind, though. She was used to taking in and cradling other peoples’ anger and disappointment. What she did mind was the sound of the rats which seemed to be coming from everywhere at once, creeping into her ears.

Phil sighed against her.

“You’re not really…” he trailed off.

“Of course not,” Caroline said.

“I never thought you…I’ve just had a long week.”

“It can’t have been much longer than mine with Skye out of school.”

“She goes back tomorrow?”

“Yes.”
Phil’s fingers skimmed her chin and her lips before burying themselves in her hair.

“I’ll tell Skye to knock it off.”

Caroline let out a breath that released tension she hadn’t know she was holding on to. She nestled herself into the curve of Phil’s body. Caroline wondered if her mother’s marriage had been like this, filled with anger and making up, but uncushioned by the comforts of wealth. Her mother’s hands were always fidgety. Caroline sometimes clenched hers into fists to keep them from fidgeting, a charm against becoming like her mother.

Her mother had fought hard to get Caroline her dance lessons. Caroline wondered if she had ever been grateful enough. Children rarely are. They accept sacrifice as their right. Or had it been a selfish desire that Caroline live the life she herself could not which had driven her mother onward? Afterwards, after the accident, she had never done enough, could never be grateful enough. The last time she had earned her mother’s approval when was years ago when Caroline had shown her this vast house and her dark-eyed stepdaughter. Did I make the right choice? Caroline had asked. You’ll always have security, her mother had answered.

There was a sudden furious hammering on the door, punctuated by Skye’s hysterical sobs. Phil and Caroline jerked apart, instantly alert, and threw on robes before opening the door. Skye hurtled in, heading straight to Phil and burrowing her face in his chest as he knelt down to embrace her.

Caroline swayed uncertainly, than knelt awkwardly beside the two, watching Phil’s face.
"He’s here! He’s here!" Skye sobbed. "I don’t want to go with him. And I told him but he won’t listen!"

"Who’s here?" Phil asked.

"King Rat! Lock the door! Lock the door!"

Phil tenderly kissed the top of Skye’s head.

"There’s no such thing, sweetheart. It’s just a bad dream."

"This is not a dream! This is real life! It’s real, and he’s going to take us away!"

Skye’s room was far away from Phil and Caroline’s room, a floor down and on the opposite side of the house. When she had first moved in, Caroline had said she wanted to make Skye independent, but now she felt a stab of guilt for placing her so far away. Phil had been ambivalent about it because the room had a window facing the street at the front of the house.

But surely Skye just had a nightmare? Caroline thought.

There was a loud thump downstairs.

Phil stiffened. He and Caroline looked at each other over Skye’s shaking body. They rose simultaneously and placed themselves between Skye and the door.

Another thump from below. Then, a third one. It was hard to tell where the sounds were coming from. It was also hard to tell exactly what they were. Caroline thought that they sounded hollow, like someone knocking loudly on a closed door.

"I shut my door in his face," Skye whispered. "I don’t think he can get it open. He has trouble with doorknobs."
The thumping escalated, becoming a battering assault. Caroline looked down at her hands as they twisted and pulled at her robe. Should she be doing something? Shouldn’t she be doing something with these hands?

There was a splintering sound. A beat of silence. Then, the pounding continued with renewed vigor, punctuated by more splintering sounds.

Caroline’s hand flew to her bedside table. She grabbed her phone and dialed 911.

“911, what is your emergency?”

Phil reached under the bed to pull out the gun he kept there. He pulled the gun and ammunition out. Carefully pointing the gun towards the ground, he started to load it.

“Hello?”

“Yes, sorry. There’s someone in our—someone broke into our daughter’s room downstairs.”

“Where are you?”

“We’re all upstairs.”

“What’s your address?”

“Oh. 427 Shirley Drive.”

Phil finished loading the gun. He gently led Skye over to Caroline.

“Ma’am? Stay on the line. We’re sending officers to your location.”

“My husband has a gun,” Caroline said.

“Ma’am, we recommend—“

“Keep her safe,” said Phil. “Lock the door behind me.”
He undid the safety and stepped out of the room. Caroline shut and locked the door behind him. She and Skye heard a splintering crunch. Skye whimpered, and Caroline held her tightly.

"...if you can’t get out of the house, can you find a secure area? A closet or a bathroom?"

"Please hurry," Caroline said. "My husband went downstairs. He has a gun."

A sleek grey body darted out from under the bed and ran across Caroline’s bare foot, its tiny claws pricking her skin, the fur of its belly soft against her toes. Caroline screamed and dropped the cellphone as it darted back under the bed. The phone went skittering after the rat.

Caroline grasped Skye’s hand, heading towards the bathroom, but she saw a flash of grey against the white bathroom tile and quickly switched direction, heading to her walk-in closet.

She shut and locked the door behind her and Skye. She pushed a box containing all the childhood things she could never part with against the door, barricading it so that the rats couldn’t creep in through the space between the bottom of the door and the carpet. But what if the rats could chew through the cardboard? She pictured rats chewing their way into the box, scrabbling all over her old leotards and shoes, chewing on the plastic hands and hair of her ballerina dolls. She let out a harsh bark of hysterical laughter, but a glance at Skye’s white face forced her to calm herself.

Would they be safer in the dark? She wondered. She reached for the light switch.

"No!" Skye hissed. "Not the dark! They see better in the dark!"
Caroline turned to reply, but froze, her hand just above the light switch. She could hear Phil yelling downstairs. She heard him fire the gun once. Twice. Then, he started yelling again, a yell that turned into a cry, then modulated into a scream that became a series of screams, each brimming with shock and pain.

Caroline’s hands flew to Skye’s ears. She wished someone would wrap his hands around her own ears. Worse than the screams were the other sounds—squelching, crushing sounds. They were the sounds of a body breaking, a body becoming something that could never be whole again. She knew all about breaking. Wasn’t she as broken as a doll on a raging child’s floor or a pianist who watches, appalled into painless wonder, as a falling knife cuts off her career with her fingers? Caroline’s ankle and knee throbbled, reminding her of her reckless pre-dinner waltzing.

There was a rustle. A lurch. A shudder on the stairs as a heavy body started moving upwards. She shrank towards the back of the closet, Skye clinging to her. She clung back, feeling fear turning her young and small again. She was seventeen again, seventeen and falling through the arms of her prince, her foot twisting as it slammed into the floor. Fear simultaneously reduced and expanded her, and she clung to Skye, more older sister than mother, helpless and filled with the love and terror that only swell the heart when the executioner raises his axe.

The top of the step creaked. A loud, hollow thump sounded against the locked bedroom door.

Skye moaned and burrowed her head in Caroline’s lap.

Can monsters find you, hidden in your mother’s closet? Thought Caroline. In your father’s tool shed? Hiding under pink-checkered sheets? Can they find you hidden in
plain sight behind your first-floor window, or in the distorted reflections of your dancing body in the studio’s mirrors?

She clutched Skye close, knowing the truth. Of course they can, she thought. They always can. They always can, and they always do. She looked down at Skye’s pale face. The monster knew where they were. The monster was coming for them.

She heard the bedroom door splinter open, and her heart beat quickened as Skye cowered against her. She forced herself to stand, firmly but gently untangling Skye’s clutching hands and sitting her stepdaughter down on the floor at the back of the closet. She put a finger to her lips and backed towards the door, eyes locked on Skye’s. Skye’s eyes widened; she understood what Caroline was about to do. Her little hands covered her mouth to keep any sound from slipping from her lips. As Caroline opened the door closet door, she squeezed her eyes shut and buried her face in her knees and hair.

Caroline slipped out of the closet and shut the door. She kept her back to the bedroom entrance and her eyes closed, needing time to steady herself. She could tell someone was there. Raspy breathing and a damp, musty smell filled the air behind her.

With her eyes closed, Caroline slowly turned around. Whatever was waiting for her in the broken doorway of her bedroom was patient and did not rush her. Silently, she said goodbye to the girl in the closet, to Phil, to the house. She said goodbye to her mother, her heart still panting after the maternal approval and love. She said goodbye to herself, her life, and whatever small power she had held over her own destiny.

When she opened her eyes, she did not scream. Her lips didn’t even twitch. She saw a gold hoop earring, bigger around than her wrist, piercing an inhuman ear like a pirate’s bauble. A tail whisked towards her and away, like a snake feinting a strike.
Finally, Caroline looked King Rat in the face. Black eyes glittering with liquid intelligence caught and held hers. She was caught and reflected back at herself in those eyes, two broken dolls before twin black mirrors.

"I'll go with you, but you have to leave the girl here. And never bother her again," Caroline said.

King Rat glanced towards the closet and tilted his head, considering. He bowed his assent, then offered Caroline his well-groomed paw. The fur was still wet with Phil's blood. Caroline forced herself to accept it and let King Rat help her over the broken wreckage of her bedroom door and into the dark hallway beyond where darker shadows skittered and scurried and danced triumphantly. She did not look back.