

JOHN HENNESSY

SURFSIDE RATS

(from *WHAT'S YOUR EXIT? A Literary Detour through New Jersey*, 2010)

Memorial Day weekend was seventy-two hours away and the rats were everywhere. Blame it on the unusually mild winter, indict Mayor Bruno for the deal he cut with the Sacco Disposal Co., or chalk it up to hardy genes and an indifferent God, but Surfside was swarming with the gnawing, feasting, furiously breeding little bastards. They overran the restaurants and hotels on Ocean Parkway, nested in the brick ovens of Pizza Palace, and chewed apart the plugs of pinball machines in the Monstrous Mega-Rcade. They gathered in hordes under the boardwalk and came up at night to storm the rusted amusements of Pleasure Dome Park, and they frightened away the lunch ladies with their fighting and copulating in the cafeteria at Our Lady. Worst of all, on Sunday morning they had disposed of the blood and body in the chapel next door.

For the first time since the town's Victorian beginnings, the board of business owners, the beachfront council, and the Monsignor and Friends of Our Lady were cooperating. They didn't give a damn how the rats had gotten to Surfside. They just wanted them taken care of. And they were giving that pinball-pushing, quarter-clutching eel, Mayor Bruno, until Thursday, the day before the summer city-folk descended, to do it. Bruno didn't need prompting. As proprietor of the Mega-Rcade and chief investor of the amusement park, he stood to lose more than any of them. He'd been to the best exterminators in the New York metropolitan area, but still the rat population grew. His last desperate measure was to post a twenty-thousand-dollar reward, half of which he produced by sticking his short arm into his own deep pocket, to be surrendered to anyone who could rid Surfside of its rats.

Until the reward was offered, Calogero Bruno, the mayor's sixteen-year-old son, had been too wrapped up in his spiritual studies to concern himself with his father's

problems. But the prospect of twenty-thousand dollars prompted Guyamorte, Cal's dealer and mentor, to call an emergency tutorial on the beach that breezy May night. "That money is ours," Guyamorte said. "I'm going to give you a crash course in the art of exterminating. Lesson number one: the Union of Opposites."

The full moon had just passed into Scorpio, a degree or two away from its position in Cal's natal chart. Guyamorte instructed him to take advantage of the lunar conditions to unite his masculine energy with its cosmic opposite: so there he was, surfing by moonlight in order to connect with the Deep Feminine.

"I'm freezing my ass off," Cal called, paddling toward the jetty, where the former cult leader and present out-patient from the Marlboro State Hospital psych-ward sat. "I need my wetsuit."

"No barriers," Guyamorte called back. "You. Water. Light. Rhythm."

"A line of crank would've helped."

"Yah!" Cal's brother Michael called. He stood behind Guyamorte waving a stick of driftwood, beating back any rat bold enough to venture out on the rocks.

"Just hurry up and catch a wave. Your brother's getting out of hand."

A storm had blown through, and now the west wind was pushing back the clouds and hollowing out the head-high crests. Cal perled on his first wave after misjudging the break in the dim light, but he rode the second one out smoothly, whipping back sharp S-turns to maneuver inside its peak. Still he failed to get tubed, which, according to Guyamorte, he would have to do if he was going to experience the Deep Feminine's full effect.

"Outside!" Guyamorte shouted.

"Yah!" Michael was jumping up and down now, uttering his one audible expression and pointing to a mother of a line-up.

Cal thrust his arms into the cold, frothy water. He topped the first wave of the set, ducked under the second, and got himself in position to drop in on the shoulder of the

third and largest. He took the drop, stepped back on the board to stall, and tucked into a deep crouch. Soon the wave was curling over his head and he struck up the chant Guyamorte taught him: "Luna do, luna done, luna two become one." In those few seconds Cal thought he felt something stronger than the pins and needles in his feet—but was it the spark of Opposites uniting? Was the Female embracing the Male? He'd have been hard-pressed to prove it was.

Whatever buzz his body was registering, it wasn't as strong a sensation as the one he felt a little while later, after he'd gotten out of the water and dropped one of his mentor's home-made antibiotics. These capsules, which Guyamorte guaranteed to guard against infection from rat bite, fecal contact, and red tide, contained B-12, vitamin C, echinacea, freeze-dried mushroom powder, and a speedy, mustard-colored hallucinogen the master referred to only as "Z." Mentor and pupil took two capsules each, but Cal limited Michael to a small jar of the Boone's Farm strawberry wine he was so fond of. Once medicated, they scaled the inside girders of the Ferris wheel and sat in the gently rocking top carriage, looking out over the moonlit water.

Below them the rats squeaked and scurried across the boards, dodging in and out from under the blue and yellow umbrellas of the Tilt-a-Whirl, tangling themselves in the silver web of the Scrambler. The smell of rat droppings was overwhelming. On the south side of town, where the old canning factories had been converted into slum housing, several small children had already been treated for rabies. The water supply there was said to be tainted, and rumors of cholera were spreading north.

Michael looked down over the rail and shook his fist.

"It's all right, Mikey." Cal put his arm around his brother and stroked his long, dusty blond hair. "They can't get you up here."

"One of those rats nearly nipped him out on the jetty," Guyamorte told him.

"Nasty little beasts."

Guyamorte lit up a sage-scented joss stick and waved it above their heads.

"Those nasty little beasts are going to make our fortune."

"I've been wondering," Cal said. "Should we be messing with the sacred chain? Remember what you said about Rimbaud and Samsara."

Rimbaud's *Season in Hell* and Samsara, the Hindu cycle of rebirths, had been the subjects of the previous day's lesson. According to Guyamorte, even Rimbaud's significant contribution to Western letters and his deathbed conversion could not have compensated for his lust for animal skins and ivory. He'd probably been re-born as a male praying mantis.

"Samsara, exactly," Guyamorte said. "Sometimes intervention is necessary. And, given your father's parsimonious nature, that reward must be an Upper Indicator. We'll get rid of the rats. I've got just the thing for it."

He pulled a stout wooden flute from the folds of his orange robe and gave a little whistle. The flute had tiny gargoyle faces carved into its stem and as Cal looked it over one of them wiggled its tongue at him. The antibiotics he'd just dropped must've been from an especially potent batch.

"As soon as I figure out the right dosage of the medication needed to play this, it's going to spell apocalypse for these rats. Then, jackpot time. We'll stock up on books, get new surfboards, and head to Bali. Forget Maui, Cal, Bali's where the real break is."

Michael took a swig of his wine and growled at Guyamorte.

"Of course, you'll have to say goodbye to this guy. You won't want to be lugging a half-wit around the world with you."

"I told you not to call him that." Cal said. He rubbed Michael's large and beautiful head. "I'm not going anywhere without him. If I go to Bali, he comes too."

"You're the prisoner who paints his cell bars blue and thinks he sees the sky."

Cal's feet began to tingle, and the inside of his head felt as though it had been customized with shag carpet. "Michael's no prison."

"Of course he is," Guyamorte said. "And you're right—at this rate, you won't be going anywhere." Guyamorte tossed the joss stick down at the rats, stuck the flute back into his robe, and climbed out of the Ferris wheel carriage. "Come around tomorrow morning and I'll give you lesson number two."

The rats on the boardwalk set up a great screeching as Guyamorte descended, his orange robe and long dark hair swirling in the wind. Michael began to growl again, but Cal stroked his enormous shoulders to quiet him down. He tried to center himself by concentrating on the lights from the fishing-boats off shore, but they were zipping like meteors and blinking like strobes. "Don't worry, Mikey, I'll look out for you."

The next day Cal skipped gym and Contemporary Catholicism, his first two classes, in order to study with his mentor. Guyamorte's teachings were truly catholic; there was no spiritual or philosophical system so hackneyed and harebrained that he wasn't willing to blow the cobwebs off and give a test-run. And, more importantly, he had the best drugs and most extensive library in town. Today, as part of lesson number two: Surrendering Control through Eros, they were smoking sens and studying French erotica. While Michael amused himself with the sexy dust-jackets, mentor and pupil breezed through some shorter pieces by Anais Nin, then went on to the more hardcore stuff of Georges Bataille and the Marquis de Sade.

"Now practice what you've learned. Overcome that Scorpio desire for control," Guyamorte advised, when the lesson was over. "Remember, degradation is also a path."

On the way back to Our Lady, Cal stopped in at Pizza Palace to buy Michael a slice. Rats had defecated in the flour bins, so there was no pizza to be had there. But he did find Annabelle Casey, his ex-girlfriend, roughing up the old Contra video game. She had shaved her head and pierced both her eyebrows since dropping out of high school the week before.

"That's cute, Annabelle," Cal said. "What you did to your face."

"I'm still not talking to you."

Annabelle had been giving him the cold shoulder since he told her he was going to try to put into practice what Guyamorte had taught him about the Roman Stoics. That had been a month back, shortly after Guyamorte showed up in Surfside. With Annabelle, Cal had affected mastery of all emotions, but he was unable to repress his protective affection for Michael. His flirtation with the old Roman philosophy ended badly: Guyamorte abused him for his attachment to his brother and Annabelle dumped him, claiming Guyamorte was turning him into a monster.

"I thought you were tough," Cal said. "I thought you were hardcore. Too bad. I wanted to try something with you." He pulled a few strips of rawhide from his blazer pocket and kissed Annabelle's ear. Annabelle took her eyes from the screen and her machine-gun-toting soldier was killed by a Marxist guerilla. "Come play with me."

A rat crept between Annabelle's feet, and the kick she gave its rump launched it into a stack of empty pizza boxes. The toppling boxes in turn knocked over a cluster of grated-cheese shakers and pizza tins, and the proprietor came out from behind the counter cursing and swinging a sauce-stained pizza-board. Annabelle grabbed Cal's wrist. "Let's go."

They went to the changing cabanas behind the Monstrous Mega-Rcade, but when Cal tried the doors they were all locked. Michael moved Cal aside, kicked a door open in one go, and ushered Cal and Annabelle inside, indicating that he'd wait and stand guard.

"I want you to tie me up," Cal said, handing over the rawhide. He swept away the rat pellets, took off his school uniform, and stretched out diagonally across the moldy concrete floor. "Make it nice and tight."

"Then move over." Annabelle pulled his wrists closer to the shower pipes.

"Still too loose."

Annabelle jerked the straps tighter and told him to shut up or she'd gag him.

"That's it. Now my ankles."

She stood over him. "Can I take my clothes off?"

"The ball's in your court."

"I mean, what am I supposed to do?"

"Really degrade me. Hit me. Piss on me or something."

"Really?" Annabelle slipped off her yellow Converse high-tops and ratty black dress and crouched next to him, skinny arms folded over her breasts. She began to plant kisses on Cal's cheek. "I'd rather just, you know, make love."

"That's not the point. Make me beg for mercy, beg for more."

Annabelle kept kissing him. Her fingers grazed the goosebumps on his hairless chest. "You're so thin and strung-out looking, Cal. I hope you got over that stoic stuff." She hugged his neck and stroked his hair. "I really missed you."

"For Christ's sake, Annabelle, stop being schmaltzy. Guyamorte said you've got to dominate me."

"You're such a jerk!" Annabelle smacked his face and gathered up her clothes.

"Where are you going? That was good. Do more like that."

But Annabelle was gone. Michael stuck his head in and made a curious face.

"Untie me," Cal said. "She's going to be good at this some day."

Mayor Bruno was a stout, bald, energetic little man with silver-capped teeth and a Mephistophelean goatee. Ordinarily he took care with his clothing—bright Italian silks and linens—but he'd tossed his tie and jacket beneath a pinball machine and was viciously beating back the rats with a broom. When Cal and Michael walked into the Monstrous Mega-Rcade for their five o'clock change-boy shifts, he looked up and started shouting. "Intestate!"

"Not bequeathed in a will."

Bruno lunged at a rat and sent it spinning across the sandy floor. "Intransigent!"

"Refusing to compromise."

"Inviolable!"

"Not violated. Pure." Cal belted up the holster of his quarter dispenser, then helped Michael on with his.

"Ah, Calogero. That's my boy." Bruno put his arms around Cal, kissed both his cheeks, and wrapped Michael in an equally emotional hug. "Stick with the kid, Mikey. He's got enough brains for both of you."

Bruno's vocabulary drill was supposed to ensure a perfect score on the college boards. Cal had come close already, but the Mayor wasn't satisfied. Cal was going to be the first Bruno to attend college, and his father expected him to do it stylishly but cheaply—he had visions of an Ivy League scholarship. The Mayor had another thing coming to him. Cal had found his teacher. And there was no good surfing in New England. Mentor, pupil, and Michael were going to strike out for wave territory.

"You can forget about work today, boys. I'm not letting anyone in here with these rats."

"Never mind, Pops. I found you an exterminator—if the price is right."

"You know the price." Bruno stroked his goatee. His silver teeth sparkled. "Find someone to get rid of these rats and I'll give you a commission. I take care of my own."

But when Guyamorte made his entrance, long, frizzy hair streaming and orange robe billowing, the Mayor began to laugh. "This crackpot? You're smarter than that, son."

"Little man, little faith," Guyamorte pronounced.

Still, Bruno was desperate enough to give Guyamorte a go. When the teacher produced a contract, the Mayor picked up his pen.

"Now sign as witness, Cal," Guyamorte instructed.

"Leave him out of it," Bruno said, giving Guyamorte a shove toward the door.

Guyamorte executed a quick Tai Chi move, waved hands like clouds, and sidestepped the Mayor. "Sign it, Cal."

The contract was written in ornate Gothic script and read as follows:

"And when the angel stretched forth his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD repented of the evil, and said to the angel who was working destruction among the people, 'It is enough; now stay your hand.'"

--2 Samuel, 24:16

In like manner, for twenty thousand US dollars, I will stay the angel's hand and get rid of the rats in Surfside.

While Michael held the two older men apart, Cal signed beneath their names.

"Relax, Pops. We'll get the job done."

"He'd better. But not with your help." Bruno picked up his jacket and tie and smoothed out the wrinkles. "I'm warning you, keep away from my boys."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Not you."

Guyamorte walked out laughing, contract in hand.

"Charlatan!" the mayor shouted. He pointed at Cal.

"Fake," Cal said. "Fraud, huckster. Con-artist."

"Yes," the Mayor nodded and kindled his palms together. "Good, good."

Guyamorte lived in the third floor tower room of the Mayflower Hotel, one of the vast Victorian flophouses along the beachfront. When the boys arrived for Cal's third and final preparatory lesson, the nature of which Guyamorte had kept shrouded in mysterious silence, the master was kneeling before his oceanside window. Cal cleared his throat.

"Praying to Neptune?"

"No. Worshipping Baal." Guyamorte indicated a small statuette he'd made out of tinfoil and spray-painted gold. The Phoenician idol rested on the windowsill, and through the glass behind it Cal could see the plasterboard turrets and plastic gargoyles that rose above Pleasure Dome Park. The amusements weren't running, but the enormous

floodlights blazed. A fog was blowing in, giving the light an eerie yellow tint.

Annabelle Casey trudged down the boardwalk, parting a sea of rats in front of her.

"There's Annabelle," Cal said. "Be right back." He settled Michael on a pair of paisley throw-pillows, the only furniture in the room, and made to leave.

Guyamorte grabbed Cal by the arm and pulled him back to the altar. "Learn from Baal," he said. "Now there was a god with balls. He killed his own father. Terrorized his brothers. Do you think he'd play nursemaid to a moron? No way. Patricide, genocide, floods and droughts, nothing was beyond him. You spend some time praying to him; he'll give you the guts to get over this attachment to your brother."

"That sounds cool, but I have to catch up with Annabelle. I hurt her feelings today."

"Good," Guyamorte said. "Remember the words of the Underground Man: 'suffering is the sole origin of consciousness.' Make her suffer. Wake her up."

"He also said consciousness leads to inertia," Cal said. "And I like the way she moves."

Michael rolled over on his pillow and nodded vigorously. "Yah."

"Good to see he shares your taste. But before you go, let me show you something." Guyamorte handed him the wooden flute he'd been toying with the night before. The pipe was as heavy as a billy-club. Carved around the small, macabre faces was a series of intricate spirals and scrolls with old German lettering. A smoking glass bowl had been attached to its far end, and the six finger-holes functioned as carbs.

Guyamorte took a toke and handed it back to Cal. "Buck up. This'll help."

Cal took a deep hit of the sweet-smelling smoke and had to sit down—hard. He wanted to ask what he'd just taken, but his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

"Vegetable stock, cloves, green Balinese bud, a sprinkle of Z," Guyamorte said, as if reading his pupil's mind. "And look--" He detached the bowl with his callused

hands, covered several of the pipe's carbs, and blew a short whistle. "The exterminator's helper. You try it. I think I've got the right dosage now."

Annabelle had plodded out of sight, and Cal's curiosity got the better of him. As soon as the feeling returned to his fingertips he blew a little tune—the opening bars of Jimi Hendrix's "Can You See Me?" Michael was so moved by the song that he stood up and began to sway and throw his arms over his head, hippie-style. Even Guyamorte, usually a master of physical control, shook his hair and waved his hands like a freak.

"How did you know I was in the mood for Hendrix? You should have seen him at Monterey, Cal. I knew you had the gift."

"What gift? I hate Hendrix."

Guyamorte took the flute and waved it before Cal's eyes. "This is the right stuff. That's fourteenth-century Rhine Valley craftsmanship. The Countess Elisabeth Bathory got her hands on it once. She'd blow tunes for the village virgins, lure them back to her castle, bathe in their blood to stay young and fit. Interesting woman, the Countess. She should have stuck to the peasant girls, though, and left the blue-bloods alone. She might've met with a more pleasant end. But go on, Cal, play some more. With the right player, that flute's magic. And I think you're the right player."

Cal wasn't sure if the source of his musical skill was woodcraft, witchcraft, or whatever he'd just inhaled, nor did he care. Song sprung from the flute effortlessly. With scarcely a pause or a segue, he emptied the storage bin of his inner ear, reproducing portions of church hymns, folk ballads, nursery tunes, blues standards, radio jingles, college fight songs, even a Schoenberg composition he'd heard on WBAI just the night before. Meanwhile Michael and Guyamorte spun like Sixties' dervishes and wheeled, reeled and jigged like Irish acrobats.

Before he and Michael went home, Guyamorte pulled him aside. "In preparation for this rite, I want you to fast and deprive yourself of sleep. Take one of these if you get

tired." He gave Cal a vial of pink, heart-shaped tablets. "Meet me at the Ferris wheel tomorrow at midnight. Alone."

A small battalion of rats had gathered outside Guyamorte's door. Michael filed down the creaky, urine-stained stairs first, kicking and stomping the rats with his size-twelve combat boots. As Cal followed, a soft tapping and high, plaintive wind-notes came from Guyamorte's tower. Michael stood still and began to moan. Cal put his arms around his brother's massive shoulders and pushed. It took all of his strength to force Michael out the door and into the fog.

Cal regarded his initiation into the mysteries of rat-killing as a trial by fire. Despite his initial reservations, he wasn't really worried about snuffing the flame of another sentient being, at least not in this instance. The rats disgusted him. And he knew better than to let the search for enlightenment stand in enlightenment's way: he could kill this Buddha on the road. It was Michael's absence from the ritual, and Guyamorte's insistence that he begin separating himself from his brother, that bothered him.

Cal knew very well that he owed his existence to Michael. Or, more specifically, to Michael's brain damage—the result of a fall from a rollercoaster his father had been too stingy to service. After Michael's accident, the Mayor was quick to breed another heir. Cal was well aware that Bruno would never have bankrolled a second child if Michael had met his standards.

But it wasn't just debt that fueled Cal's commitment to his brother.

Their mother had died in a car wreck (she wrapped her El Dorado around a billboard inviting one and all to Marlboro country) while Cal was still an infant, and his earliest memories were of Michael's wide, apple-cheeked face rising like the sun over the bars of his crib. It had been Michael who held his fists over his head as he learned to walk, it had been Michael who trotted along pushing the seat of his bike as he learned

how to ride, and it had been Michael who, no longer able to read himself, shoplifted the entire EZ Reader series so Cal could learn to read before kindergarten.

Michael was his playmate, his stronger shadow, his audience, and, nine years Cal's senior, his source and business partner in the sale of alcohol to the under-aged. Michael went everywhere with Cal. He even followed him to school and sat in the lobby of Our Lady until the dismissal bell rang.

It was hard to say just how much Michael understood. What he couldn't perceive intellectually he certainly understood emotionally, and that something important was happening, something that was going to separate him from Cal, was clear to him. Against Cal's orders, he wasn't taking this lying down.

"Just wait here," Cal whispered. He forced a bottle of Boone's Farm into Michael's hands and pushed him back on the bottom bunk. "I'll be right back."

"Yah!" Michael lurched up into a sitting position and pointed to the window, which was illuminated briefly by a red flash of lightning. A wicked storm was blowing in from the southeast.

"I know it's raining, but I'll be all right. Here," Cal said, shoving a chair before the window, "you don't have to go to bed, you can sit here and watch me. I'll be right down there, there by the Ferris wheel. I'll wave to you and you'll see I'm okay."

Their house was an architectural obscenity, a six-story aluminum cylinder that stood atop the Monstrous Mega-Rcade's flat roof. It had been built with money embezzled from the Surfside coffers and was the Mayor's proudest achievement. It could be seen from every inch of the town. Michael sat before the curved, plexiglass window and began to relax. He took a sip of his wine.

"That's right, take it easy." Cal pulled the rawhide straps from his pockets. He hummed Michael's favorite lullabye, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," and slowly fastened his ankles to the chair. "Na-na na-na, and contagious, na-na na-na, entertain us..."

When Michael was bound, Cal grabbed his yellow slicker and ran for the door.

The rats were coming.

Horde after horde the rats came, up from the basements and sewers, out from beneath the boardwalk, down from the attics, along the sandy streets, wave after wave they came. The air was filled with the sound of their claws over pavement, their nails over the boards, their paws flailing through the sand.

"Clear mind. No thought. No-thing-ness. An absence that is the only presence. That's right, that's it, Cal, they're moving now."

A high, thin squeak rose from the flute in Cal's hands. The chirp of a drunken bird. The note quavered, gained shape. The howl of a lap-dog. Another note, longer and lower. Ratsong.

"Clear mind. Clear mind!" Guyamorte was standing up now, waving his arms above his head as if he were stopping traffic.

Through neck-breaking concentration Cal mustered a bleak tune. Lightning flashed and rain beat against the Ferris wheel carriage in tin-drum accompaniment.

"Now! Still water, still water."

What with the sea boiling and rolling below and the storm surrounding them, to think of still water was no easy task. But Cal did it. First a dull green ebbing tide, then a flowing blue. Then stillness, clarity, a bottomless, transparent ocean.

"Into that sea."

Cal opened his eyes and looked down to see: the rats had come together and were moving like the slowly withdrawing tide across the beach.

"Close your eyes! Concentrate. Into the ocean they go."

"Yah! Yah!"

"Ignore him. Ignore him."

Treading slowly across the sea of rats, like Jesus on the water, down the boardwalk steps and onto the beach below them, came his brother.

"Michael! I'm up here," Cal called. "Michael!"

"Shut up! You're going to blow it." Guyamorte grabbed the flute and began piping away himself.

"Michael!"

Michael was still moving along on top of the rats, heading for the water. Cal descended the girders of the Ferris wheel, crunched over the scurrying bodies of hypnotized rodents, and caught his brother by the arm.

"You're as much an idiot as he is!" Guyamorte shouted down. "I told you to get rid of him. You haven't learned a thing!"

Cal took off his slicker and draped it over Michael. The huge half-wit, hardly covered by the yellow jacket, sputtered and sobbed in the rain. Cal led him back to the boardwalk, back toward home. The rats scurried past them in formation and made for the water, a dark river emptying into a white sea.

The next morning Cal woke up with a monstrous headache. Michael had hold of his arm and was pulling him out of bed and pointing toward the window. The storm had blown itself out and the sun shone over a big commotion down on the beach. Tractors and dump trucks lumbered back and forth across the sand, plowing up and carting away the bloated carcasses of the rats. After leaping into the waves to drown, many had washed back to shore on the in-coming tide. The stench, even up in their bedroom, was overwhelming.

The master was striding down the boardwalk in a new purple robe. He headed for the Mayor, who danced around between the tractors, directing the clean-up crews with a scented handkerchief.

"It's pay-day." Cal pulled on a pair of jeans, tied a bandanna over his nose and mouth, and hustled down the stairs. Michael trotted in his wake.

"I'd like to be paid in cash," Guyamorte was saying when they pulled up behind him. He turned and gave them a cool look. The smell didn't seem to disturb him.

The Mayor clapped Guyamorte on the back and laughed. "What do you need, pal? A couple of bucks for coffee and a haircut?"

"Pay me." Guyamorte pulled the contract from beneath his robe and held it before Bruno's face. "Now."

The mayor dropped his handkerchief and shouldered up to the master's chest. "Look you crazy bastard, get lost or I'll have you sent back to the nut-house faster than you can say Mama."

"Pay him, Pops," Cal said. "He's got your mark."

"Shut up, Cal. You'll get your commission. But you," he turned to Guyamorte. "I don't owe you anything. It says here I'm supposed to pay you for getting rid of the rats. Well, there they go. In my trucks. Unless you want to end up in little pieces in the same place they're going, beat it." He grabbed the collar of Guyamorte's robe and shoved him into the sand.

"I'm not through with you," Guyamorte said. The crowd on the boardwalk made way for him, heckling and whistling as he left.

When his mentor had disappeared, Cal turned to his father and kicked sand on his well-polished shoes. "Why are you such a cheap bastard?"

The Mayor lunged for his son, but Michael stepped between them. He lifted Bruno in a tight bear-hug and shook him.

"Put him down, Michael. Whatever he's got might be contagious."

Cal skipped school that morning, hoping to meet with his mentor to work out a plan. It wasn't the money that he was interested in, it was revenge. Vengeance was in his

Scorpio nature, Guyamorte would have said. But Guyamorte didn't say it. He didn't say anything. When Cal went by the Mayflower, he found Guyamorte's door bolted shut and his knocks received no answer.

Still, the day wasn't a total wash-out. He ran into Annabelle and nearly wore his knees out with apologies before she consented to see him late that night. The summer season was starting the following day, and she had to spend the evening setting up her parents' ring-toss booth on the boardwalk.

Cal got Michael to go to sleep early, hoping to slip out alone when Annabelle called, then crawled into his bunk and dozed off himself. The phone woke him several hours later. Even before he answered it he knew something was wrong. The light was on and the door to the stairs was open. Michael's bed was empty.

"Cal," Annabelle said, "get down to the boardwalk, quick."

When he arrived at the flimsy golden gates of Pleasure Dome Park, Annabelle was running to meet him. "They're down here," she said. Cal followed her down the boardwalk stairs to the beach. "I tried to stop them, but Michael wouldn't listen to me. Guyamorte was playing this flute thing, only there wasn't any sound coming from it, and Michael was walking along behind him like he was doped up or something."

The red and white life-guard stands had been set out on the sand in preparation for the season's opening, and Guyamorte stood atop one playing his flute. The lights from the boardwalk drew his silhouette and cast their glow beyond him to Michael, who wallowed in the waist-high waves, slowly making his way further out.

"Michael!" Cal shouted. "Michael! Stop! Hurry up and help me," Cal called to Annabelle. "He can't swim."

Guyamorte spotted them and began to pipe furiously. Whatever soundless tune he was playing had entranced Michael, just as Cal's own piping had stunned and guided the rats the night before. Cal ran at Guyamorte's post and threw all of his weight into the

stand's long, A-framed legs. The stand wobbled, then fell as Annabelle gave it a shove with her shoulder.

"Michael!" Cal called, diving into the cold whitewash. "Michael!"

"Let him go," Guyamorte yelled. "You're too late. Figures—that numb-skull's the only child-hearted kid in town."

Michael had snapped out of it and was thrashing in the swells beyond the jetty. Cal and Annabelle swam toward him, but he was caught in a rip and couldn't swim against it. He was quickly swept outside. They swam into the rip in pursuit, diving and surfacing unsuccessfully until they were both exhausted. Before Michael went under for the last time he turned back to Cal and waved slowly. He plunged below with a splash.

Cal refused to stop. After he had been sucked under several times and seemed to be in danger of drowning himself, a surge of adrenaline stronger than any of the master's concoctions hit him like a defibrillator. A few more kicks and he had Michael, blue and motionless, by the collar. Annabelle caught him under the arms and pulled him and his cargo back to shore.

When Cal could stand without Annabelle's support, he headed back up to the boardwalk. "Where are you going?" Annabelle called.

"Stay with him," Cal said. "I've got to do this myself."

Guyamorte was there in the tower room, lolling on the floor in his purple robe, his books, flute, and vials scattered around him.

"I promised I'd teach you," Guyamorte said, his voice thick from downers. He began to laugh. "You're a lousy pupil, but I think I've penetrated that skull of yours finally. You can't pick and choose the lessons that suit you—the master is the master. You've got to learn all of his teachings."

Cal approached slowly, unsure of the best way to exterminate him.

Guyamorte rummaged through his vials, but they were all empty. "Dilaudid, darvon, demerol, DMT, Dionysos, Demiurge, Defoe, Dostoevsky, Delphi, Delos--Christ, Cal, have you ever thought of all the good things that begin with D?"

Cal picked up the flute and stuck it in Guyamorte's face. "Stand up, you bastard."

"You need to learn to turn the other cheek. Put that down, Cal. It's too late, isn't it? He's gone. Poof. Nowhere. Everywhere. Don't bother hitting me, I'm tanked up enough to walk through fire. I've done you a favor. Set you on the right path. No attachments. All inquiry."

Cal backhanded Guyamorte across the mouth with the flute, cracking teeth. "You must've missed something there, dude." He waved the flute above his head, felt its satisfying heft. But he didn't swing. Instead he lowered it to his lips and began to play.

"Stupid, Cal," Guyamorte said. "You'll be living with that for a long time." Then Guyamorte's eyes rolled back in his head and he was quiet.

Ratsong.

Cal piped and Guyamorte followed, across Ocean Parkway, up the boardwalk and through the dark amusements, past the Ferris wheel, the Scrambler, the Tilt-a-Whirl, the Rockin' Roll-R-Coaster, down onto the sand. Pan-like, Cal hoofed it down beyond the waterline. Guyamorte walked into the water and Cal tossed the flute in after him.

The master flailed his arms against the undertow, but he was sucked out past the bathing ropes, beyond the clanging buoys, toward the lights of the commercial fishing fleet.

"Cal," Annabelle called. She took his arm and drew him back toward the boardwalk. "He's gone, Cal."

But by the light of the fishing boats he could see the master swimming away in slow strokes.

When they crawled out from beneath the boardwalk, the sun was already high above the ocean and the early-bird crowds had begun to arrive. The beach seemed shockingly white now that it was cleared of rats and their droppings. Annabelle's shorn head and the silver rings in her eyebrows were even more alien in the bright morning light. These gestures had their spiritual antecedents, Cal supposed. Who knows what they signified now. Together they helped Michael up. He was still pale and soaking wet but seemed to be coming out of his stupor. "Calogero," he said, the first intelligible word he'd uttered since his accident. "Thank you."

Cal didn't miss a beat. He wouldn't be surprised by anything any more. They walked to the end of the jetty and sat where the cold spray could reach them. Seagulls circled and swooped. Cal wondered what they looked like from above. The land meeting the water, the rocks thrusting out into the waves—and there they sat, a Taoist tableau. It was knee-jerk with him, this kind of thinking. But he'd learn to get over it. Annabelle leaned over and kissed him.

A siren and the blue lights of a police car announced his father's discovery of their empty beds. They still had a few seconds before the mayor arrived, photographers in tow, all pomp and celebration. Bruno would have preferred a burial, mourning, and one fewer tax exemption, Cal knew. The more mileage between him and his father, the better.

There was money in the bank, enough for him to spring Annabelle and Michael from Surfside, deliver them all to California or Maui—hell, even Bali. But Cal decided to stay. He'd had enough of archetypal transformation, and he was no running-boy. He'd rather sit there in the sun stroking Michael's long, beautiful hair and holding Annabelle's hand, the sirens drowned out by the maniac birds and the breaking waves.