**Cathexis**

Nick left the house and drove himself to work. It was earlier than usual and the grey morning was still shaking off the gloom of night. He hadn’t woken Carole, because he really didn’t want to have to face the consequences of their discussion the previous evening.

The discussion that may have been coming for a very long time, but which, when it finally came, was as unwelcome and sad as a landslide, obliterating everything they had built up together during their six years of marriage.

He stopped outside the high perimeter fence to present his security pass and for his car to be searched. The laboratory was often targeted by animal rights activists, who had been known to hide themselves under moving cars to gain access to the animals used in experiments. Nick was early because a consignment of 1,000 white rats was arriving by lorry, and someone had to oversee their arrival and sign for them. He had just parked when the unmarked lorry arrived, and twenty crates were unloaded.

Once inside the lab, Nick took out his favourite penknife, and used it to open the catch of each crate door to allow the rats into the holding area. A river of rats streamed from each crate, all following the one in front. By the final crate, Nick was getting careless with the knife, and he accidentally scored the ear of the first rat to leave the crate, leaving a bright red line from the base to the tip of its delicate pink ear.

‘Sorry’ he said automatically to the rat, before looking around guiltily to see if any of the lab technicians had noticed. They hadn’t. Nick breathed out, then tried to spot the rat he had marked. He wanted to make sure it wasn’t bleeding, as if it was, he would have to destroy it. Watching the rats milling around, finding their bearings and attempting to create places where they could hide, an impossibility in the brightly lit glass cage, was mesmerising.

Nick watched them intently for ten minutes before spotting Red Line in the corner of the cage, the first to locate and use the water bottle, the first to find the food hatch. Red Line was trying to piggyback on the other rats to get high enough to find out where the walls of the cage ended. He tried again and again to stretch upwards to find an end to the smooth surface. When he concluded that there was no way out vertically, he ran up and down the length of the cage, over and under any rats that were in his way.

Nick’s colleagues tapped him on the shoulder for the morning meeting. He wrenched himself away from his observations and accepted the cup of coffee that someone had made for him. Nick’s lab coat had one spot of blood on it, that had dried black, but it was tiny and he was the only one aware of it. In the meeting, the Laboratory Director outlined the experiments for the next few days. The new batch of rats were to be used to test for safe levels of a nerve poison called botulinium toxin, better known as Botox.

The rats would be divided into batches, and injected with carefully measured levels of the diluted poison, then observed minutely in order to calibrate the safe levels for human use. Symptoms to look out for were paralysis, impaired vision, and respiratory distress. A control group of rats would form a baseline of performance measures, against which the poisoned rats would be compared. The tasks set for the control group included mazes, locating and eating food, and the ability to distinguish between green and yellow tubes.

Nick had not been sleeping well in his loveless house for several weeks, and after last night’s terrible talk with his wife, he was particularly tired. When he was allocated the task of separating out the control group from the others, and doing the first set of task observations, he couldn’t think of any questions, but merely nodded his assent, put his lab coat on, picked up his notebook, and went back to his observation position by the cages.

Red Line was scraping up urine-soaked sawdust and moving it to one side, trying to form a nest of dry sawdust. Nick could smell the sharp scent of urine, and he could feel the difference between soggy sawdust and the warm, dry version. Red Line’s splayed toes were efficient movers of material, and his bright eyes were alert to any changes in the environment, changes that could mean the hope of escape, or at least the hope of food. Nick was careful to ensure that Red Line was part of the control group of rats.

As he drove the familiar route home, Nick stopped automatically at red traffic lights, drove slowly in the built-up areas, and barely registered the street signs or advertising posters that he saw every day. He drove home without a conscious thought. And now he didn’t want to get out of the car and go inside. Carole’s car was there in the drive, so she must be already home. He vaguely wondered why she had so often worked late recently. And now, just when he would have preferred not to see her, her car indicated that she was home.

Just then he saw Carole walking slowly up the street to the door. She stopped, fumbled for her keys, looked around, saw his car but apparently not him in it, opened the door and went inside. A minute later she appeared again at the door, looked over more carefully at his car, gave a weak wave but no smile, and closed the door again. Nick tried to form a hypothesis about why she was outside the house. His scientific brain drew a blank. He then considered the emerging patterns of his wife’s behaviour. She had become secretive and withdrawn, often finding reasons to go for walks alone or to visit friends.

Other times she was ebullient, over-friendly, demanding that he admire her new salon highlights or a new work suit, making plans for the weekend, or cooking unusual dishes with uncharacteristic levels of enthusiasm and inventiveness. He preferred this positive version of Carole, but he couldn’t relax, because he couldn’t quite trust her behaviour to be genuine. And sometimes, when he had told himself to just go with it, and was settled in with her for the evening, she would snap back into herself, leaving him lonely.

And now they were breaking up. It wasn’t anyone’s fault apparently. She had just stopped loving him. She was bored with their routine. She didn’t want to have children just to alleviate the boredom. She thought that adding babies into the mix would increase the drudgery. Nick had argued that they didn’t have to accept their lives as they were. They could move house, change jobs, even take time out and go travelling. See the world. But it was no good. Carole had eventually admitted her boredom was with him, Nick, and nothing could change that damning judgement.

Nick ate alone, watched TV and went to bed. Carole had moved into the other room, and had even taken her own meal in there. In the morning, Nick woke, showered, grabbed a bread roll and set off to work in his car. The traffic lights were all on green, and he got to work early. He was keen to find Red Line, to see how he was after his night in the cage. Today the control group of rats would begin their cognitive tasks. Nick shrugged on his lab coat, said a warm hello to Red Line, then started to set up the first task, a labyrinth.

With just 6 rats in the control group he could spend quality time with Red Line. At first, the rats explored the labyrinth aimlessly, and appeared to find the food hatches by chance. But increasingly, no matter where in the labyrinth they started out, they found shortcuts to the food hatches. Clearly, they were able to synthesize and process information when they had the motivation. Red Line excelled at all the tasks, and when he was weighed at the end of the day, had actually put on a few grams, because he was most efficient at finding food.

Nick held Red Line for a few moments after weighing him. He wore lab gloves to avoid transferring human smell to the rat, but he could feel Red Line’s solid muscular body through the thin plastic. Red Line wriggled round to see Nick’s face, then Nick put him back in the cage, next to the fresh water. Nick had removed the soiled sawdust and had put an extra handful of dry sawdust in the corner where Red Line nested. The sawdust smelt sweet and woody, and it reminded Nick of his boyhood den behind his father’s workshop.

The next day Red Line’s group were introduced to the green and yellow tubes. A green tube always led on to another area of the cage. The yellow tubes were always blocked a few inches along, meaning that the rat had to back out again, or turn around if it was a small one. The test enabled the rats’ vision to be tested, if they could differentiate the tubes by colour, that would indicate that they could see the difference. As Red Line backed out of his first yellow tube, Nick felt the rush of disappointment. A dead end.

But in the green tube, the slippery perspex underfoot led on and on, opening following opening, feet scratching as they pushed the animal’s body around the corners, up vertical tubes, across long diagonals, occasionally encountering another rat, but mainly finding his own way, through open cage areas, down chutes, and finally reaching food hatches with the tastiest food in them. Nick held his breath as Red Line ate the food, feeling pleased with his success.

At home, Carole had evidently moved out completely. He had no idea where she could have gone. He couldn’t remember any particular friend being mentioned, and her parents lived two hundred miles away, so she wouldn’t be able to get to work from their house. She hadn’t left a note. Nick ate alone, watched TV, and went to bed. In the morning he showered, grabbed a bread roll, and drove to work.

To his shock, in the morning meeting, Nick was tasked with overseeing the rats who had been injected with Botox, as they attempted the same tasks as Red Line’s group had done the day before. The rats were visibly slower, their movements erratic, their thought processes slower and more random. Despite the fact they were the lowest-dose batch of rats, their impairment seemed extreme. Nick wrote a full set of notes, his stomach in knots, comparing their abilities and behaviour to those of the control group.

Before going home, Nick decided to say goodbye to Red Line. He hadn’t seen him all day, and he wasn’t in a rush to get home to his own empty house. Red Line was nesting again, this time with another rat, who appeared to have a swollen stomach. Nick lifted out Red Line’s companion, and weighed it. It was significantly heavier than it should be. Nick observed it carefully, before noticing with a jolt that it was female. All the lab rats were supposed to be identically male. Red Line was sniffing upwards, looking for his mate. Nick replaced her gently on the nest.

Nick went out to his car, got the sleeping bag that he kept in the boot for emergencies, and went back into the lab. Everyone had gone home hours ago. He found an abandoned sandwich in the staff fridge, and microwaved some soup. Nick washed up the bowl, then observed Red Line and his bblady as they settled for the night. He gave them another handful of dry sawdust, changed their water and topped up their food. He smiled at them, then stroked them gently with his bare finger. The lab lights were low, and the rats settled.

Nick laid his sleeping bag under the bench, folded a fleece to make a pillow, and closed his eyes. He went straight to sleep, the deepest sleep he had enjoyed in a very long time. Occasionally the rats scrabbled or squealed gently, but he was oblivious. The smell of sawdust reached his nose and he smiled as he slept. The nest was warm, his female companion was close, and they lay flank to flank, occasionally feeling the stirring of babies inside her.

A bright light shone in the compound outside the window. Voices could be heard, urgent whispering and footsteps running around the outside of the lab, looking for the way in. Several male voices. A couple of female ones, all trying to speak quietly. Nick wriggled out of his sleeping bag and went to the window. He could see an enormous hole in the perimeter fence, at ground level, and an equally enormous pair of wire cutters on the ground next to the hole. His heart banged in his chest. Activists!

Two of them were getting ready to smash the window of the small kitchen, having cut the wires of the alarm system and covered the CCTV camera with a jacket. Nick realised with a sickening lurch of his guts that the camera would also have faithfully recorded his decision to spend the night at the lab. Nick went to the door and opened it.

‘Don’t smash the window’ he said to the intruders. One of them held a knife out at arm’s length. Its blade glinted in the soft light from the lab.

‘Who the hell are you? A security guard?’ asked the knife-holder.

‘I should be asking the questions’ said Nick, ignoring the knife. ‘Who the hell are you?’

‘Animal Liberation Front’ said a female voice, who had sized up Nick and decided that he posed no threat. ‘Stand aside’.

The group of intruders filed into the laboratory, past Nick, who stood helpless to one side of the door. They started opening the catches on the cages, and when the rats didn’t move from their nests, they tipped them up so that the rats had to start running, had to start looking for an escape route, had to run wildly looking for any cover, any shelter, any darkness.

1,000 rats, minus a few hundred who had died of respiratory failure or suffocation during the Botox experiments, swarmed around the lab, many finding their way out of the door, out of the compound, and into the streets. Just as many found sanctuary in the staff kitchen, rest room, and toilets. A proportion of the rats were impaired by the poison they had in their systems, but Nick knew that the control group, including Red Line, had the best chance of successful escape.

He became fixed on finding Red Line and his pregnant female, and crawled under the bench to search there. Red Line had found an escape route through electricity cabling channels, via a hole in the skirting boards, and as Nick followed what he thought was Red Line’s lady, who he reasoned must be following Red Line, the channels stretched out long, and led under the ground towards the perimeter fence, then beyond it.

They came out again at a sub-station on scrubland near the bus station. Cars and sirens were circling the roads on their way to the laboratory. The inner alarm must have been triggered, and the intruders would be trying to run away from the scene as the siren screamed. Nick, Red Line and his female crouched by the sub-station wall. Someone had dropped the remains of a bag of chips, wrapped in greasy paper, on the ground next to a bin. The chips still had some warmth. They ate.