Small Talk

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Abstract

"... At the genetics laboratory ... I see. -And just what do you do there?"
those months and nothin’ happenin’ to him, and now he has to go for this. It ain’t fair.”

Matt wanted to say something to make his father stop talking like that, but no words would come. He wouldn’t have known the right words if he could have said them. He heard the sounds from the next room. He thought it was crying. He wished it could have been crying. The rasping sound broke through all the other sounds that were converging on his brain. He couldn’t stand to listen—not to that.

“Don’t cough, Ma,” he whispered. “Don’t cough, please...”

Small Talk
by Jan Kahn

AT THE genetics laboratory... I see. — And just what do you do there?”

“I take care of dead rats.”

“Uh huh. — And are these some special rats?”

“Sure, they’re ‘Violet’ rats. They’re really brown, but you’re supposed to call them ‘Violet’.”

“Violet rats that are really brown... Yes... I see. — Tell me, what do you do with these rats?”

“It’s like I said, I take care of the dead ones. Only the experienced help gets to work with the live ones.”

“Yes — But what do you do with these dead rats?”

“I pick them up and spread their toes apart.”

“You spread their toes apart... I see. — Why do you do that?”

“So I can see which toes have been cut off.”

“Oh — some of their toes have been cut off—how interesting... Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are some of their toes cut off?”

“So I can tell what number rat they are—or were. (They’re dead as I said.)”

“Yes... You say rats have numbers?”

“Uh huh. Each toe on the fore and hind paws stands for a
number. You cut off the toe that corresponds to the rat's number."

"And you cut the toes off?"

"No. . . The experienced help does that when they're still alive. I don't get them till they're dead."

"Oh. . . Yes. . . And — why are the rats numbered?"

"So I can tell which one died."

"It makes a difference?"

"Of course."

"Yes. . . One more thing — what are the rats used for?"

"Experiments. They're injected with typhoid germs and then exposed to atomic radiation."

"I see. — You're trying to cure them then — to aid human medicine."

"No, we just see how long it takes them to die. Then I record their numbers and throw them in the garbage can."

"Oh."

"I haven't always worked with rats. I started out on *Drosophila* — you know — fruit flies."

"And did you spread their toes apart too."

"Heck no, I just put them to sleep with chloroform. — Well, here's my stop. It's been nice talking to you."

"Yes. . ."

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**The Ringmaster**

*by Bruce Butterfield*

Life is a circus, whirlwind-paced; and Time, in a tall silk hat, Cues the acts with the snap of a whip, held in his practiced hand.

Wearing our pointed caps and dressed in ruffs, like clowns,

We take our turns in the ring, to the blare of a skull-faced band.

Birth and struggle and death—
Through our paces we go;
Love and labor and loss—
These are the tricks we know.