

The Incredible Sadie

Part 2

by Kevin R. Grazier

When Sadie gnawed through the sheet of Styrofoam separating her lair from my basement bathroom, it was clear that the only place she could be gnawing from was under the porch. What was life like under there? What attracted her? First opportunity, I checked. A quick search found her exit to the outside world, and her emergency exit on the opposing side of the porch—one that any self-respecting wild rat would have—well hidden by a flower bed full of plants. I also discovered several burrows, or the beginnings of burrows, along the front wall of the house. I rooted out a few old paving stones in the garage, and as I placed them to block the view of her front door from the eyes of hungry predators, it occurred to me that she probably knew the ins and outs of that house far better than I ever could.

That idea was confirmed hours later when I heard her in the walls of my bedroom that night while trying to fall asleep. Unsuccessfully. Sadie wasn't helping. Even when I started drifting off, a scurrying wild rat in the walls was hard to ignore. It was the only time I ever heard her in my room—that night seemed to be dedicated to scouting and mapping where it was safe, where she would have to be cautious, and where the "Do not enter!" zones in the house were located. We were both doing a lot of scouting the next few weeks, determining how this relationship was going to evolve.

I assumed she had all the nooks, crannies, and passages of the house scouted by the following morning, but my data collection took longer, and was based more on time than location: what was Sadie doing, and when was she doing it? A towel covered her door jamb entry into my basement—partly to prevent drafts, but equally to signal when she had been in the basement since she had to push it aside to enter.

Since West Point starts classes very early in the morning, my day ended mid-afternoon, allowing me to collect information more directly. For the next several days, I would get home, sneak quietly in the back door, open the door to the basement stairs, flip on the lights, and, more often than not, she would be there visiting my rats. That was, of course, until the light spooked her to bolt for her door jamb portal.

In the evenings, a much more cordial manner of interaction was evolving. When it was treat time for my verms, that came to include Sadie. I left her food and snacks every night in her Styrofoam hole: the fare ranging from fruits to yogis to scrambled eggs to

chicken. She may have been born in the Hudson Valley, but Sadie showed true New Yorker roots and proved to be an enthusiastic pizza rat!

Initially, the food disappeared within anywhere from 5 minutes to an hour later. Over time, she would snatch the food the instant I set it down and removed my hand. As she grew increasingly comfortable with this mode of interaction, I stopped setting the food down, and would only give it to her if she took it directly from my hand. Although she went without treats a few times when she wouldn't take the offerings directly, she soon learned to take food from my hand. She also learned her name and started to come to her peep hole when called.

Insisting that our interactions be closer if she wanted food helped make her more trusting, and had the side benefit that I could also give her spoonfuls of water. I also often left her bedding. What rat would turn down a fresh supply of soft felt or fleece?



Behavioral scientists have recently come to understand that rats pay attention to who was kind to them and will actually reciprocate a kindness. In return for the food, water, and bedding, Sadie left me presents: shiny pieces of home insulation backing, colorful rocks, nut shells gnawed into sculptures (which I pinned to the Styrofoam above her hole in much the



same way a proud parent displays a child's drawing on the refrigerator). Occasionally, the "presents" were treats she rejected—carrots typically wound up on the floor at the base of her peep hole. Dexter and his broccoli had nothing on Sadie when it came to carrots. (If you are unfamiliar with the reference, search for "Dexter the rat" on YouTube.) With the exception of the carrots, I still have every gift Sadie ever left me.

Our afternoon interactions started to seem much more adversarial. I stopped seeing her in the basement when I returned home from work, but the towel had often been moved, which led me to the realization that she recognized the sound of my car pulling up. Once I started parking at the end of the driveway, I started seeing her again... until she figured that out as well. In one instance, I parked in the street, ran to the back of the house, and pulled open the huge *Wizard of Oz* door to the back stairs just as she was exiting her door jamb hole. She got up three steps, saw me, did a quick "about face," and zoomed back into the basement. With the evening interactions becoming more substantive, I stopped trying to "jump" her when I returned home from work and just focused on evenings. Naturally, I documented as much of this as I could on social media, and Sadie had become the star of her own reality show—one that was completely unscripted. Even non-rodentophiles were tuning in nightly for the Sadie Show.

Yet, for as many pictures as I posted on social media of The Incredible One, there were many interactions that I had kept to myself (well, until now). There was the night when I looked out one of the basement windows, and Sadie was standing just outside the glass. I allowed the grass to grow tall right in front of the house. The move wasn't popular with my landlord, but it kept predatory eyes off her. That night she stood between the glass and the grass, and I was able to watch her for a good 5 minutes as she stood casually grooming, wholly unaware that she was being watched.

Another time, I was cleaning one of my boys' cages, not realizing that Sadie was hiding underneath. I made a sudden motion that spooked her, and she bolted from her hiding place at the same time as I moved into her path. She slammed into my thigh, ricocheted off, and I swear I could see the cartoony birds flying around her stunned head. She collected herself and zoomed for the door.

Have you ever seen rat roadkill? Probably not. Have you ever even seen a rat cross a street? Probably not—explaining why you don't see rat roadkill. The only rat I have ever seen cross a street was Sadie. One warm September evening I was mowing the front lawn and didn't see her hiding in the grass, perhaps hunting mice or insects. When the mower got uncomfortably close, she broke from her hiding spot, flew down the steep bank at the front of the property, raced across the street, and dove into the hedges. She made sure to be back at her peep hole that night for treats, though.

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I grew increasingly fond of the idea of catching Sadie and making her a pet—I've tamed both wild brown rats and roofies and, in Kevin's Ideal World, I envisioned breeding a strain of longer-lived pets, free of the ravages of mycoplasmosis. Pragmatically, I was at West Point on a one-year contract, and there was no guarantee that the next renters of the house would be as amenable to sharing the house with a wild rat who came and went as she pleased. Our social media followers—and by now Sadie had gotten pretty popular—got used to my new battle cry, one I borrowed from the movie *Wayne's World*: "She will be mine. Oh yes, she will be mine."

With word that I was invited back to West Point for a second year, the urgency to capture Sadie diminished a great deal, but my ability to give her a suitable home once I did increased dramatically. Due to some unfortunate passings among my mischief, I had an empty Martin R-699 (aka Ruud) cage—a cage five feet tall, two and a half feet wide, and a foot and a half deep. I figured that if I was going to deprive her of her freedom, even with the benefits of safety and ample food and water, I would give her as much room to run around as I could.

I crafted a plan to catch her, one that involved convincing Sadie that the bathroom that she regularly peeked into was a safe haven—hoping, of course, that she had forgotten that it was where I had captured her once, though briefly, before. I decked out her intended cage with a nice sturdy house, plenty of fresh, soft bedding, and new peg board, which I used to cover horizontal wire cage surfaces. I placed the cage just underneath her Styrofoam peep hole so she would get accustomed to its existence. I left the door to the room open during the day, and I went in as seldomly as I could except to clean food bowls in the morning and feed Sadie treats at night. I initially left her a bowl of food at the door, and each day I would refill her bowl, and move it a tiny bit further into the room. It was all part of conditioning her to believe that this place was safe. It was safe; I just had to convince Sadie of that.

On 16 June 2017, I came down the stairs to find Sadie atop one of my guys' cages—a long way from her escape hatch at the door jamb. I ran to the door, moved a brick to block her escape, and had her trapped in the basement. My plan worked, and instead of bolting for the door, she ran into the bathroom. I ran in after her, closed the door, and flipped on the lights. I had her! Sadie frantically sought an exit from the room, but there was none to be had. As I opened the bottom cage door, hoping, perhaps, that she would run into that cage in the same way she had run into another cage previously, she lept up onto the side of the cage, and scaled the sheer face—seeing something that I had missed.

Since I believed that Sadie wasn't going anywhere, I was focused on snapping a couple of pics for her online fans, but then saw what Sadie saw. Too late. I had intentionally put the cage directly beneath her peep hole so she would get used to its presence. The mistake was in leaving it there. I pushed the cage away from the wall, but she took a flying leap, and scrambled



into her peep hole the opposite direction from which she usually peeked out of it. Sadie was back in her home, and I'd blown it again.

We teach cadets at West Point that, to improve, you have to be honest with yourself and others about your abilities, your mistakes, and your shortcomings. Being similarly candid with myself, I had been more interested in snapping a Facebook photo than keeping my head in the game, and Sadie was still on the loose because of it. I thought, "Well, now I have a firsthand understanding how BuzzFeed gets their content for lists like, '25 Selfies Taken Just Before a Greusome Accident.'" Although my distraction didn't lead to a fatality, the operative word was, "Yet."

Not only did I spend the rest of the evening beating myself up for missing an obvious escape route until too late and blowing an opportunity, rats are super smart, and I had come to consider Sadie a genius among rats. I figured that I would never lure her back into that room again. My options grew limited, I had no idea how I would capture her, and I had a great deal of respect for her ingenuity. At least I had a year to craft a new plan, but at that moment it was Sadie: 2, Kevin: 0.

Sadie, clearly, didn't hold a grudge, and was back for a celebratory treat later that night. Given light of her near-capture, it was a pleasant surprise that she continued to come for dinner and treats at her peep hole when I called her, and rarely missed a night. She also continued regular visits to my basement, evidenced by the displaced towel at the door, but she was becoming more adept at avoiding me. Other than a face in a hole grabbing her nightly snack, I saw her less and less. As summer turned to autumn, and both the coming school year and a new batch of West Point plebes grew ever-nearer, my workload increased. Since it was more of the same, and I had already submitted Learning Curve Mountain, preparation for the coming term wasn't nearly as time consuming or exhausting as it had been the first year.

My first winter in New York was an incredibly mild one, a nice reintroduction for a native Detroiter who'd lived in LA the previous two decades, but I had serious reservations that the second winter would be similarly pleasant. Naturally, I worried for Sadie's safety with the pending cold and snowfall. It was her turn to craft a cunning plan. I ventured down into the basement one cool November morning to find a pile of dirt at the foot of one of my rat cages. Did one of my guys escape? Nope. Sadie was moving in. In the dirt fill between the front wall of the basement and the half wall paralleling it, Sadie was digging a burrow. It looked like she had every intention of wintering over with the rest of the mischief... indoors. She, clearly, shared my misgivings about the coming winter and its potential for extremes of cold and snow.

By now, Sadie had a network of outside tunnels dug along the front wall of the house, a truly impressive feat revealing that her intelligence was surpassed only by her industriousness. She had chosen to migrate her excavation skills into the basement. Sadie would keep her nightly appointment for food and water at her peep hole, but mornings would usually reveal a new pile, sometimes multiple piles, of dirt on the floor of the basement from the previous night's effort.

I moved the bowl of food that I had been using to lure her into the bathroom to her construction site and that became rat fuel to enable each night's hard work. What also started to become clear was that she was assigning different areas and different tunnels with specific functions. One tunnel was her larder—I could tell because I peered down with my phone and was just able to make out a pile of stashed rat food, and a collection of yogies. I saw a new pile of dirt in a dark corner some distance from her construction site and wondered why she would haul dirt way over there. Sadie was smart, there had to be a reason. In brushing it away... "Yech!" Not dirt. I had, however, located Sadie's toilet.

Between the tunnels both inside and outside my house, as well as the mountains of displaced dirt at the foot of my rats' cages that would greet me each morning, Sadie's industriousness was truly inspirational. It's not an exaggeration to say that when the rigors of West Point life got to me, and I was mentally and phys-

ically exhausted, I found strength by asking myself, "WWSD?" To put her influence in perspective, I held a Ph.D in physics from UCLA, had worked to help put the Cassini spacecraft in orbit around Saturn, was currently a professor at West Point... and I drew strength and inspiration from a little wild brown rat.

When one November evening I descended the stairs, startled her, and instead of bolting for her escape hole she dashed into her burrow, it was confirmation to me that she was starting to consider the basement her primary residence. Although we'd shared a house for almost a year and a half at this point, I looked forward to being "roommates" in a more official capacity and hoped that new and different opportunities to catch her would materialize. Although not obsessive about it, I was still kicking myself for letting her slip my grasp back in June.

As November became early December, and it was obvious that 2017-2018 was going to be a more typical Northeast winter than the previous year, I wondered if I should even continue to leave food and treats at Sadie's peep hole, because that forced her to go, if not outside, into the cold. As if she was reading my thoughts, I was feeding my mischief one morning, and noticed that the previous night's cache of peep hole treats was untouched. That wasn't unprecedented, but it was unusual. I left her some more that night, thinking she'll come to collect, and discover a bounty. The following morning the pile remained untouched. As it was the next morning, and the next, and the next.

Perhaps her construction was complete, and she was living deep in her new labyrinth, comfortable and out of sight. Perhaps she didn't like going out into the cold to collect food any more than I liked her going. "I know," I thought, "I'll leave her treats at both the peep hole and near her burrow." Nothing. A week passed. Given our location at the edge of a forest, I had mentally prepared myself long ago that, one day, Sadie might simply vanish, never to return. Preparing for an eventuality and facing that reality are very different things.

As much as I didn't want to destroy her hard work, I made a few exploratory excavations of my own into her subterranean network. Her stashed yogies grew a form of mold that, I suspected, was of extraterrestrial origin. The chamber that I surmised was her bedroom had bedding that I had passed through her peep hole, and which she had lugged all the way into the basement. I found a lot of fascinating things, but none of those fascinating things were Sadie. "Leave no man behind," is a fundamental principle of the U.S. Army, and dammit, I would leave no rodent behind: I was going to do everything I could to find her. I searched inside and outside the house for proof of life, or proof of death. I dug a bit farther into her tunnels. As a last-ditch effort, I had two of my guys, Bryan and Scott, sniff around her construction site hoping that they would either catch her scent, or she would catch theirs—they were two handsome strapping lads, after all. Nothing, and it was going on two weeks.

"She's gone. I have to accept that." Several days had passed, and Sadie hadn't taken the food or water

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I'd left her in any of her usual spots, nor had she moved the towel that blocked her preferred entry to my basement. Even as I reminded Sadie's social media admirers that she's a wild rat, that I live at the edge of a forest with no shortage of hungry predators, and that two years is really very old for a wild rat, I was having a hard time accepting my own words that The Incredible Sadie was gone. I dumped her food and water, used foam gap filler to seal the entry holes she had gnawed to my basement, caved in her tunnel network, and planted a tiny American flag in memoriam. The experience was fun while it lasted, and I felt grateful to the Universe that it had happened to me.



Naturally, among her followers on social media, there were those who had faith that she wasn't really gone. "Perhaps she ran off with a man rat," "I bet somebody else has better treats," and, "Maybe she went somewhere to have babies!" were popular refrains. These people didn't, on a daily basis, see the hungry predators that prowled the area, or the huge Maine Coon that had recently started lurking around the house. I was more pragmatic in my assessment, though a tiny fading spark in me still held out one hope for the fairy tale ending.

It was, indeed, a reasonably harsh winter in the Hudson Valley, and I did keep an eye out for tracks in the snow. Raccoons, foxes, deer, lots of those tracks. No rats. No comings or goings at the exterior entrance to her lair. Honestly, I didn't check that often. I was trying my hardest not to think about Sadie. I wasn't always successful. I knew even as I was doing it that I was setting myself up for disappointment, but a part of me still held out hope that, on Christmas morning, I would go to the basement bathroom, fling open the door, and there would be a brand new hole gnawed into the Styrofoam. It was the only present I wanted. Sadly, life isn't a Hallmark Christmas Special. When I went down there on Christmas morning, no new hole, no Sadie. That non-incident was the final straw that forced me to accept that she was truly gone, and in a vacuum of information, my thoughts turned dark. How did she go? Did she get eaten? Was she sick? Was

she in pain? Did she suffer? Did she die cold and alone? This is all my fault — how could I have let her get away when I had her twice?

For me, the new semester couldn't come quickly enough — I would be really busy, and not have time to ~~obsess over~~ think of such things. Ironically, we got one extra day of vacation in celebration of our football team's second consecutive victory over the U.S. Naval Academy, after losing the 14 previous years before I arrived. I was ready to get back at it, though, and needed something persistent to occupy my thoughts. A semester at West Point is pretty relentless, even for faculty, and that would do the trick.

There is a saying in Hollywood that the difference between a screenplay and real life is that a screenplay has to make sense. Even I started to think that nobody would buy the story of my interactions with this wild rat had I not documented so much of it online, and I came to think that hoping for the fairy tale ending was simply asking too much from the Universe. I had been provided an amazing experience, and thought I should just be grateful for that.

There is another saying drawn from the world of entertainment: "You ain't seen nothin' yet."



Kevin Grazier

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I s--t you not!!! #weshouldntgetourhopesup #toolate #TheIncredibleSadie #addingtothelegend #theratthemyth



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On Wednesday, 17 January 2018, I was up early to get to class, went into the basement bathroom to prepare breakfasts, and... there was the hole in the Styrofoam that was supposed to have been there three weeks earlier. Sadie always did insist that our relationship was going to be, as much as she could make it, on her terms.

To Be Continued...

***** *END OF PART 2* *****