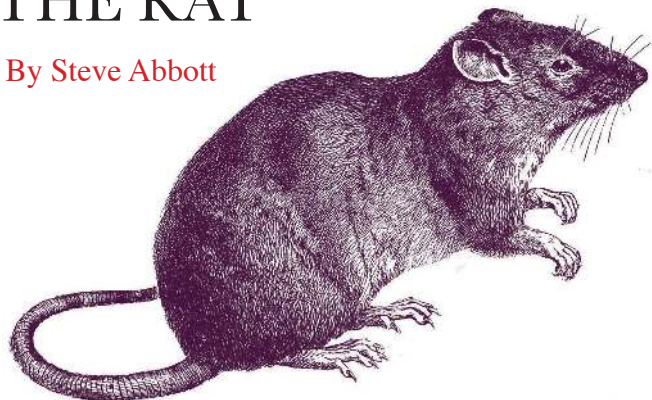


THE RAT

By Steve Abbott



Between his first cup of coffee and his third, which was usually about the time the mail arrived, Colby Sparrow Pulsifer III devoured the *The Sacramento Bee*: threats of war, lost pets, comics, sports, classifieds, and his favorite, the obituaries. There were some Colby could do without.

And there it was: "Jackie Hulga, 76, passed away from natural causes on Wednesday. Her husband BB, predeceased her. She leaves one son, Beanie. No services are planned." Finally, Colby thought. Her passing resurrected hope that a rare historic Gold Rush whiskey flask that had belonged to BB (Bill Bob) might now pass on to him. On his death bed BB made Jackie promise to never part with the flask. Now she had departed the flask.

The whiskey flask was embossed THE RAT / 2nd & J / SACRAMENTO, a saloon dating from 1861-69. When Ratkovich, a Serbian immigrant, opened the saloon, he named it Rat's Saloon. Before long patrons began calling it The Rat. A bottle salesman convinced Ratkovich to have a flask made for the saloon. "Call it The Rat and have a picture of a rat on it. The boys will love it." Ratkovich demanded, "Give me deal." The salesman answered, "Ten percent!" So a gross was made, and a century later, only one had been found, and it was flawless.

Jackie Hulga's husband, BB, had for awhile been Colby's main competitor in collecting pre-Prohibition Sacramento whiskey flasks. Neither man could explain to himself exactly why he had become fixated on collecting the flasks thrown away as worthless a hundred years earlier. But they had. Collecting was a psychological fever that had plagued them and a few others.

BB had been raised in a poor coal mining family in Kentucky. He collected lollipop sticks, empty cigarette packs, and paper labeled tin cans. Having "stuff" gave him a sense of security. He didn't want to find a Mona Lisa or a copy of the U.S. Constitution behind a rock concert poster. His Appalachian DNA made him happy with quantity because he could not afford quality.

During Sacramento's 1960s redevelopment period, buildings were being razed, lots leveled, and foundations dug. City officialdom was oblivious to twenty foot holes being dug in plain sight by men looking for the refuse of early residents. Paper, cloth, wood, and iron deteriorated in the damp soil. But glass and pottery remained as pristine as the day they were made. So a new hobby began: bottle collecting. There was fierce competition

among collectors. What had been worthless, now had value. The scarcer an object, the greater its value. And nothing was rarer or more coveted than The Rat.

BB and Colby had been the leading flask collectors until Colby's real estate and monetary advantages doomed BB's hope of having the definitive flask collection. BB had pride, but he was also a realist. So he sold all of his flask collection to others, none to Colby, and The Rat to no one.

Colby had made his money the easy way. He inherited it and parlayed the small family fortune by buying distressed buildings and undesirable lots in the redevelopment area, suspicisioning that the government was going to build an interstate highway through Sacramento from Seattle to San Diego. He was correct and multiplied his fortune by several factors, making him "the Man," able to pay more for previously worthless stuff than anyone. He not only owned many of the properties being dug, but was also friends of the owners of most of the others. If anyone wanted to dig for treasure, he had to get Colby's permission and give Colby first right of refusal for anything found. Colby had "brass knuckled" BB, but BB still had The Rat and the psychological satisfaction of knowing that Colby would never get it.

With BB's demise, Jackie owned The Rat. She and BB shared an inheritance of poverty. Her Dust Bowl Okie fruit picking family had lived under a tree in California's Central Valley. Jackie knew hunger and bare feet. She had no respect for people without calloused hands and deeply tanned necks. She had eaten her share of beans and even named her son after them. Semiliterate and mean as junkyard dog, she despised Colby and his type, but like BB, she was a realist.

When BB left Jackie with a house, garage, two sheds, and a yard full of junk, she had to deal with it. Their scrounger friends only wanted a few things, but her plight eventually reached Colby. He knew that she probably would not sell The Rat, but that she might be amenable to a business offer to rid herself of the hoard of junk. So he offered to buy the junk and The Rat. She accepted, except she made a counter offer. Colby could have the junk and the first right of refusal for The Rat when the time came for her to move it on. Colby agreed, had the junk immediately hauled to the city dump, and then began the wait for her conscience and sense of fair play to awaken. It had been a long wait.

As Colby was pouring his third cup of coffee of the morning, he was still staring at Jackie's obituary when he heard the mailman pull up behind the house. There was a package for Colby, a box with Beanie's return address. Colby knew instantly what it was. He opened the box and found a note, "If I dy (sic), male(sic) this to Coalby Pulsefer." Beanie had followed his mother's directions.

As Colby unwound the bubblewrap around the contents of the package, he felt the object a little softer than it should be... and it smelled revolting. Then he opened it, shards of broken glass, one large piece embossed The Rat, and then the partially mummified and putrid corpse of a rat. There was a note, "You always wanted The Rat, now you got too (sic). Jackie."

