Last Year at Betty and Bob's: A Novelty

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An Occurrence

Once inside the enormous edifice dedicated to the last gasp of an anachronistic trade, she slipped. Here she was again in the PostOffice. The reflective surfaces in this curved glass and polished brass monument deflected any illusion of service. She thought the building had a mutant feel to it, the errant progeny of a science museum and a Trump hotel.

She was well aware of the urban myth swelling from the aura of the long west wing of this structure. She ambled to the notorious sector on the fifth level in no rush. The rush was to come. For once there, where gilded public storage lockers marked a repetitive landscape of forgot-
ten matters, lay a nearly frictionless floor, slicker than a freshly Zambonied ice hockey rink. She'd heard this place was commissioned as a quasi-functional architectural art/science proposition. She doubted this. There was no plaque, no curatorial legend, no explanatory handout. This place was a well of Chinese whispers, minimal, fluorescently lit and slick slick.

The swish hallway allowed visitors and patrons unusual transport opportunities. Once a nuanced push-off technique had been mastered, super-gliding in everyday street shoes was on offer. Though the speed one could attain on this rarified surface was initially alarming, dangerous even, many returned to repeat the thrill. Starting and stopping a skid with pinpoint accuracy required a technique that came quickly to skiers and skaters. Few PostOffice visitors had yet to competently achieve it. Accidents were rife during peak hours.

She'd been here once before, managing a few tentative skids. Today, though dressed in bulky everyday winter wear totally inappropriate for athletic activity, she'd spontaneously veered from her early morning routine into the imposing building. She fancied a full-fledged fling at the POMOC, the infamous PostOffice MotionCorridor, so dubbed by zeitgeist skidders. Her timing was opportune. The place was dull quiet.

Eyes closed, she mentally fast-forwarded the “How to Skid for Beginners” YouTube clip. The flashy moonwalk technique was cool oh and yeah the warrior pose was trending but stick with the basics she told herself.
Bette B scanned the walls and handrails for anchors to slow an accelerating slide. Assaying a number of safety islands and handholds she assumed the take-off posture. Timidly she exerted a kind of push, and felt tingle of corporeal effort. Then she was off!

On her first skid she attained a ±20 kph pace but botched the stop. Unable to stay on her feet her butt hit the tarmac hard. Well-padded, no black and bluing welt would likely erupt. Trying again, she wobbled on the push-off but remained upright and in partial control of her momentum. By her third attempt she was poised and ready for a full run and whizzed down the long hall in a state of delighted, adrenaline panic. Thirty kph? Forty? Flash memories of her first ride on the Stratosphere roller coaster blew through the rush of her pulsing blood.
The pinpoint stop, her first ever, told her to quit while she was ahead. For a moment she wished there’d been a witness, an audience to her achievement. Overcome by an endorphin cocktail of exhilaration and exhaustion she’d had enough for one day.

Step by slippery step, she carefully plodded her way from the friction-free hallway back to the central rotunda. She focused on her soles swiping the floor. Occasionally she glanced up to catch locational bearings. It was then she noticed what had always been there. Near the halfway point a tiny brownish figure was rocking gently as if to a beat. Squinting at first, then eyes wide, she apprehended a lone animal of the type often seen dining on the subway tracks far below.

Even from a distance she could make out that the claws of its rodent feet, like her own leather-soled pumps, were incapable of firmly gripping the gleaming synthetic veneer of the tarmac. Skidding, the animal began to speed directly towards her. For a nanosecond she was amused, expecting it to slip by as one passing on a parallel runway. Instead, it was heading straight for her bare naked legs. She froze. Before she could gulp another packet of air into her lungs, the animal had ascended the length of her coat and, having reached the vertical limit, pressed its snout against her left cheek. Its whiskers pricked against her nostrils. She did not, could not, exhale.

Perhaps her startled body over-exaggerated the import of the event but it felt like a life-or-death moment. What confused disorientation the rodent may have felt she couldn’t know. As in films, her perception was in slo-mo though the speed of the gesture with which she squeezed the animal’s snout in her right hand to incapacitate its mouth as a biting machine was impressive. She could feel the solid mass of its long incisors as she pressed its jaws
closed. The danger momentarily abated, terror flushed through her organs and limbs as she let out the air from her lungs. She didn’t yet know it had scratched her face in its own survival throes. Adrenaline suspended any sensation of pain. Pushing her thumb into its windpipe, she cut off its flow of oxygen until its heavy body fell limp in her hands. The sheep wool of her mitten covered its eyes so they had no intimate contact during this exchange.

She then dropped this thing as one would a hot potato. Lying in the middle of the glassy floor she sensed it was in a semi-conscious state and might recover its bearings at any moment, scampering again up her leg in retribution or fear. She looked around for help, for guidance of some kind.

The corridor was still unpeopled save for a thickset older couple dressed in layers of heavy clothing. Carefully pushing a cart with several stacked suitcases and plastic wrapped cardboard boxes from a mini-storage company, they cautiously approached, affirming without words the many implications of Bette B’s plight in the unfolding situation.
In her mind’s eye, a circular tracking shot followed, panning the composition of the scene: a comatose rodent on a shiny, super-synthetic floor, her wooly traumatized self, a stoic elderly couple in matching, oversized blue coats heaving a metal luggage cart. Huddled together, all are speechless.

Bette B had experienced a fleeting visual perception, evoked in the hysterical microsecond of disabling an animal’s breathing apparatus, of a surprisingly fluffy under neck fur. In a flash of dubious recognition, the metro rat appeared as a long-haired, short-snouted guinea pig or gerbil. A species of the cuddly domesticated variety adored by Homo sapiens. In that flickering, the animal became a non-threatening other and she Goliath to its puny David, a statuesque tower of organic comfort in the speedy-slick, unearthly wormhole that was the POMOC.

Just how an ethical instant emerges from an event’s unfolding is a question she’s been probing for some time with little success. Speculative armchair-style tinkering leaves her unsatisfied just as the full flush of sensuous experience overwhelms any juridical balancing act. Generally, she runs away, fast, from philosophical discussions of moral coding. Now she feels there’s nowhere to hide, no escape hole.

Presumably, the inert body of the animal will be dealt with in some fashion by someone; clubbed to a certain death by a PostOffice custodian and unceremoniously incinerated. This is its likely fate. It may be handed to a lab for preemptive bacterial analysis or bagged and carted off to a university biology class for dissection as city vermin have recently been categorically upgraded as fair trade research specimens. Or perhaps, as happens in fairy tales and crime thrillers, she is an unwitting protagonist in the tendrils of the rodent’s storyline. In the event’s ethical
nanosecond, this is what she imagined as she rendered the potentially toxic animal flaccid. In any case, this is the story she tells herself, walking home at an everyday pace along the resistant, concrete footpaths of an urban conclave buzzing with imperceptible forces affecting every move she makes.