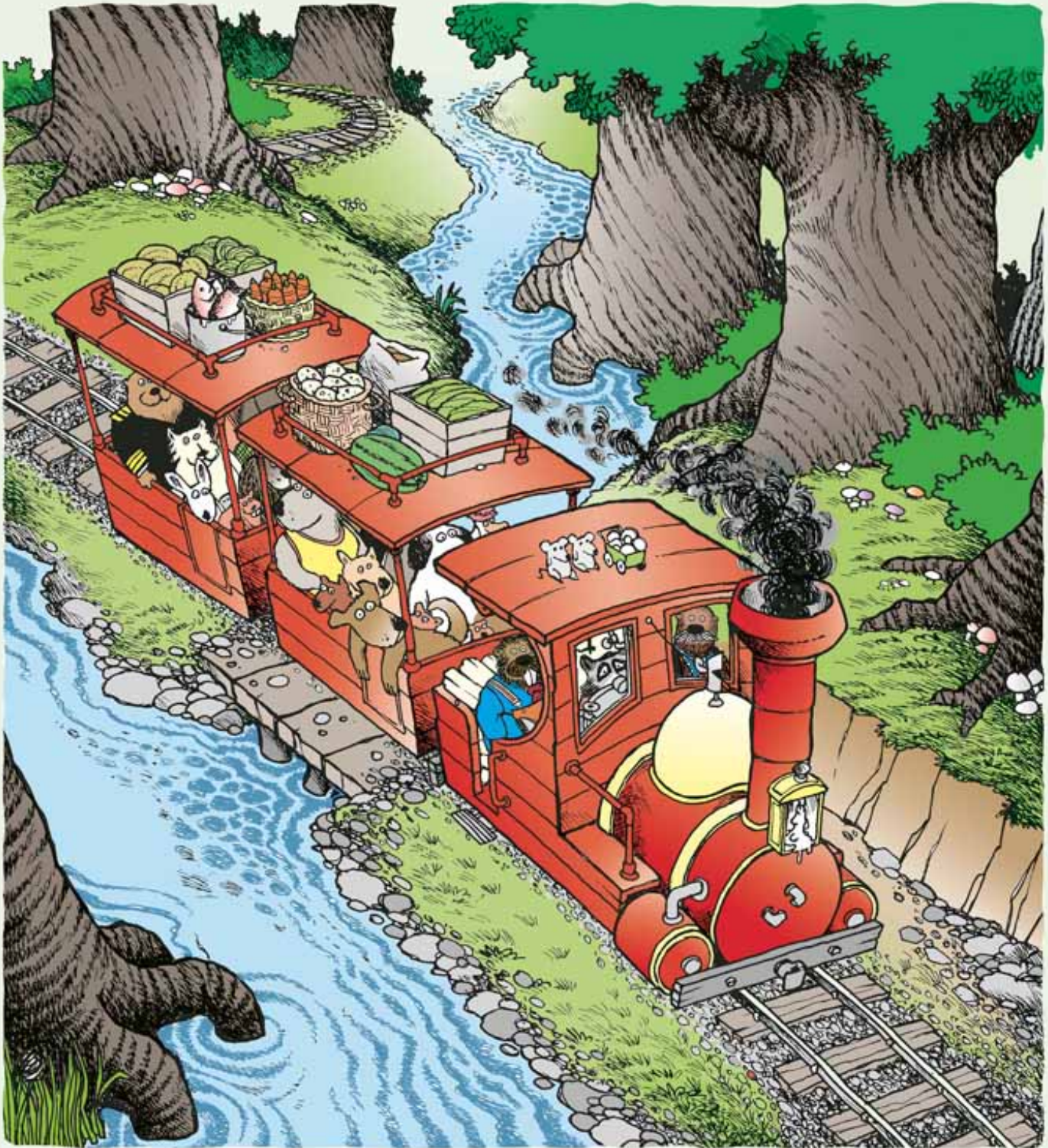


The Red Rocket Railroad

The Secret in Black Maple Woods



Adrian Raeside

THE RED ROCKET RAILROAD

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Chapter 1

The Black Maple Woods were haunted.

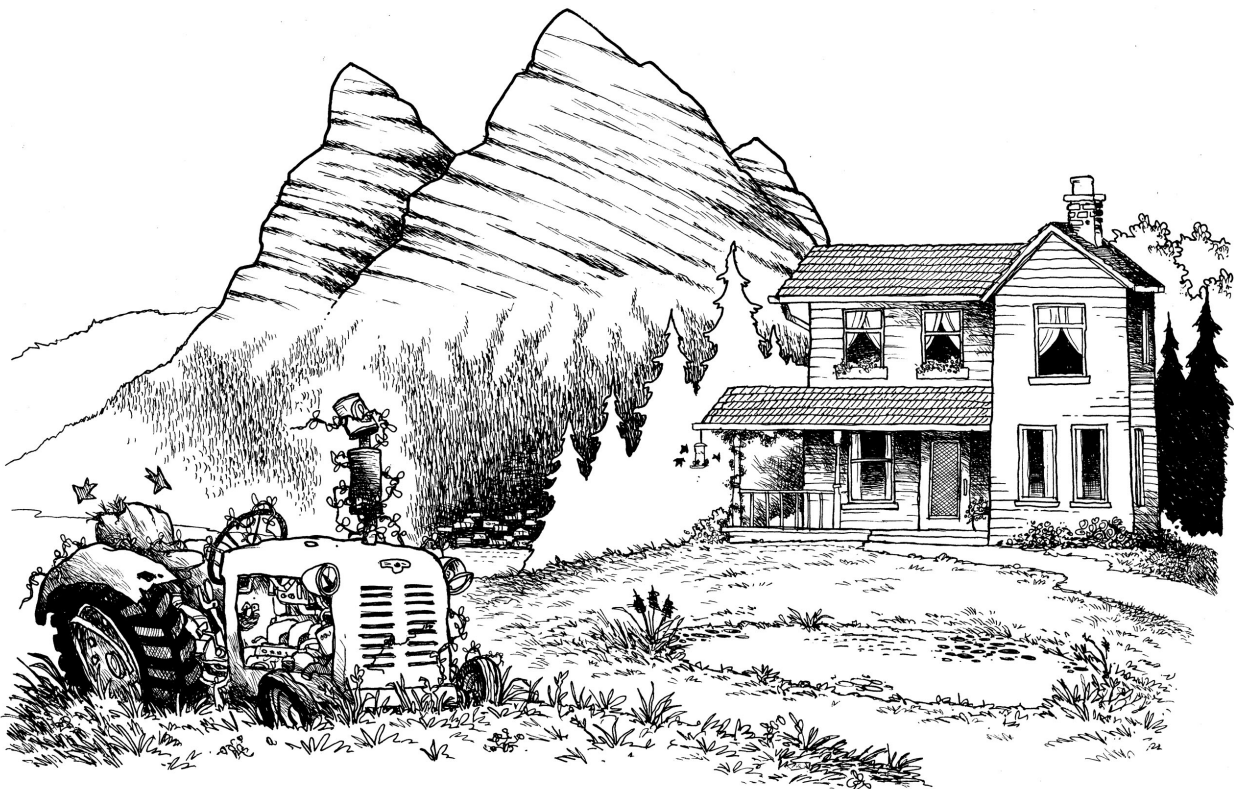
At least that's what anyone who followed the narrow paved road away from the city, up into the rolling foothills of the White Lion Mountains thought. Although named after the Black Maple, no one could remember ever seeing one. That was probably because so few people had ever dared venture into the Black Maple Woods. They were supposed to be haunted, after all.

Travellers would, however, stop at the Faraway Farm produce stand at the edge of the Black Maple Woods. They couldn't go any further even if they wanted to, as the road ended at Faraway Farm. Sitting at the top of a small valley tucked in 2



against the outer fringes of the Black Maple Woods, Faraway Farm was famous all over the coast for its produce stand. Shelves groaned under the weight of big juicy peaches, sweet corn cobs, luscious beets, fresh rainbow trout. In fact, almost anything you could ever want to put on your kitchen table could be found at the Faraway Farm stand. The old farmer and his wife always greeted their customers from the city with a cheery smile and would be happy to pass the time chatting about the weather, what was in season and which were the ripest fruits. But if the conversation drifted to questions about the nearby Black Maple Woods, they'd carefully change the subject, perhaps pointing out something like how exceptional the rhubarb was this year...

Today was like any other late August afternoon. Cars were pulled up to the farm stand and the farmer and his wife were busy chatting with their customers who, as usual, were too busy squeezing fruit and sampling grapes to pay any attention to the narrow gravel drive that wound down through the trees to the farmhouse,

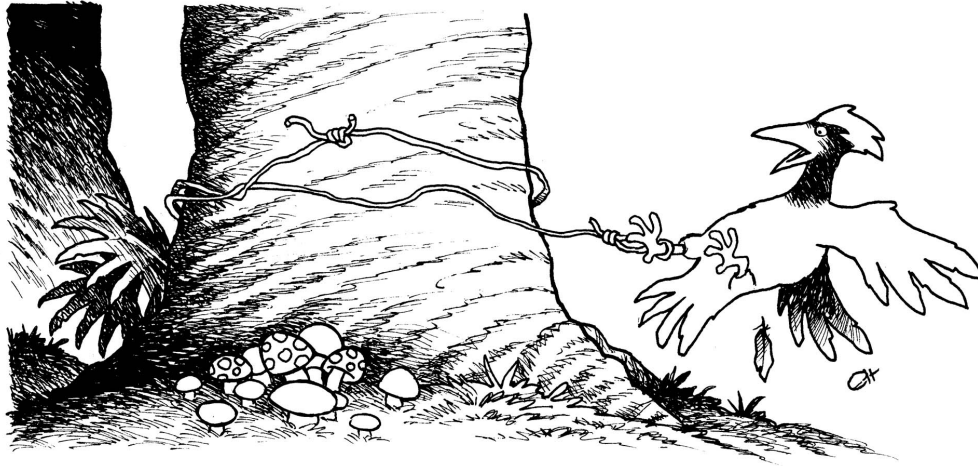


a brightly painted, rambling 100-year-old wooden building, surrounded by neatly manicured gardens brimming with roses and lavender. But the neatness only extended so far. In the fields behind the farmhouse sat a collection of machines one would expect to find at a farm; a tractor, plows, hay bailer, manure spreader... all disused and rusty, with the tractor now home to a family of swallows. The patchwork of fields sloped down to a small emerald-coloured lake in the distance, with the ocean just visible through the trees that crowded the end of the lake. Rather curiously, instead of neat rows of corn, cabbages and orchards laden with fruit, all that grew in the fields were long grasses and wildflowers that swayed in the late afternoon breeze on that typical summer day.

But just inside the Black Maple woods, it was far from a normal summer afternoon. A small hairy animal hurried along a narrow path that wound between tall cedar trees.



It was late in the day, far too late for a small otter to be out alone in lower Black Maple Woods. Normally by now he would be at home in his cottage under the old willow tree on the banks of Coldwater Stream, curled up in his favourite chair. But the fish weren't biting today, so he had lingered longer at Bear Creek than he should have, and now he was getting worried.



Twilight was the time of day when swamp rats emerged from their damp underground tunnels near Skunk Cabbage Lake, looking for their evening meal. Otter didn't have any fish in the sack that was slung over his shoulder, but that didn't matter, barbecued otter was right up there with fish pie in swamp rat cookbooks. Otter dug a paw into the pocket of his faded jeans and felt the familiar handle of his battered pocketknife. He might need it before his journey was over. Daylight faded early in the deep woods, with familiar and friendly trees taking on unfamiliar and unfriendly shapes, and a couple of times Otter thought he could see eyes in the gloom.

A fluttering sound came from the trees next to the path. He stopped, sniffed the air and strained his ears. But all he could hear was the thump, thump, thump of his heart. He pulled the scarf from around his neck and mopped his brow. Even though it was getting chilly, he was sweating. A twig snapped, followed by more fluttering. This time he heard a faint cry: "Help!"

It could be a trap to lure him into the woods, or it could really be someone in trouble. Otter dropped the sack, pulled out his penknife and opened the tiny blade. Holding it in front of him like a sword, he took a deep breath and stepped off the path. After a few steps, he could make out something moving at the base of an old cedar tree.

"I warn you, I'm armed." He growled.

“Otter?”

“Woodpecker!”

Otter rushed over to find his old friend, Woodpecker, his feet caught in a wire noose.

“Oh, Otter. Thank goodness it’s you!”

Otter took his penknife and in seconds had sawed through the wire, freeing his friend. “Filthy rats!”

Woodpecker got to his feet, but fell down again. Otter rubbed Woodpecker’s feet to get the circulation going again. “Were you trapped for long?”

“At least an hour.”

Otter looked around him. The woods had become even darker. “I can’t smell any rats but at this time of day they can’t be far away. I think it’s time we both got out of here. Can you fly?”

Woodpecker flapped his wings and landed on a branch above Otter.

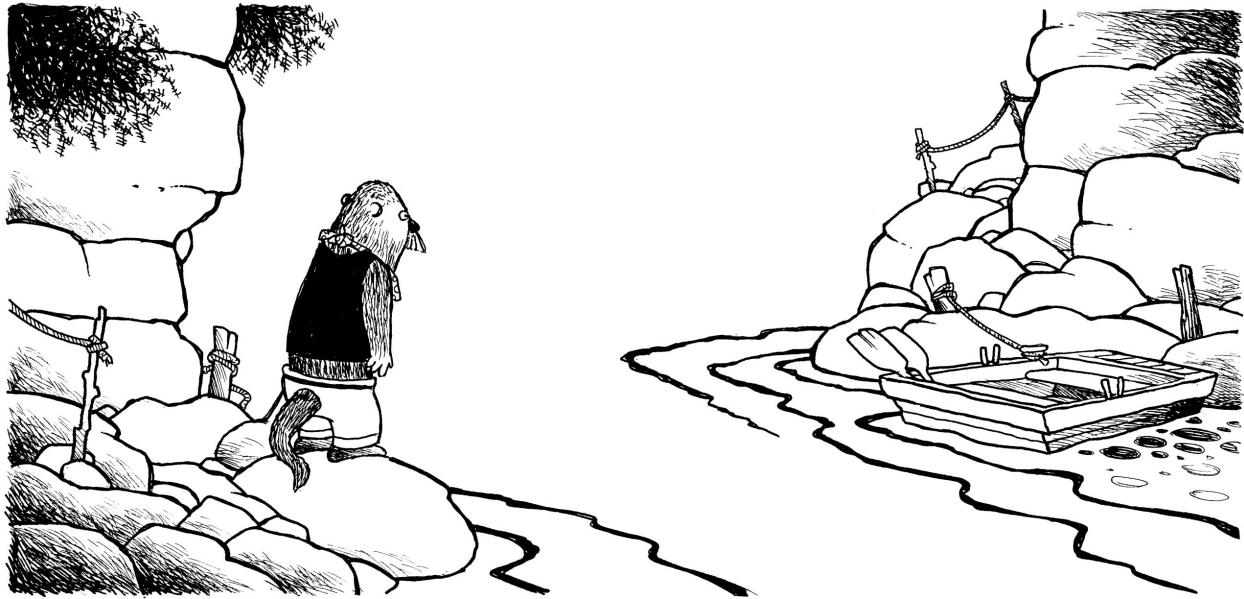
“I’m fine, but you’d better get moving. It’ll be dark soon and you still have a long way to go.”

“OK. Good luck, Woodpecker!”

Woodpecker fluttered up through the branches and disappeared.

Otter trotted down the path, eager to put as much distance as he could between himself and rat hunting grounds.

The trail ended abruptly at the Coldwater Canyon ferry. The ferry was actually just a very small wooden dingy and was the only way to get to the heart of the Black Maple Woods which, so far, was free from rats, as they rarely dared cross the aptly-named and swift running Coldwater Stream. Either they couldn’t swim but more likely, they were just too darn lazy. But this evening, instead of finding the ferry tied up at this side of the stream, where he left it this morning, it was on the other side.



Otter took off his vest and pants and stuffed them into the sack. He put it between his teeth, waded into the stream and started swimming for the other side. Even with his extra layer of fur, he shivered, but it wasn't just the cold water that chilled Otter, Coldwater Gorge was where huge, slimy stream snakes lived and he'd rather face a hundred rats than one hungry stream snake.

Fortunately, the stream snakes were either bothering someone else downstream, or asleep and Otter made it across the water without incident. Shaking himself off, he put on his clothes and looked up at Greyhawk Bluffs, where the path became just a narrow ledge running along the cliff. He sighed, slung the sack over his shoulder and started the slow climb, almost losing his footing in a couple of spots, sending rocks spinning off into the stream far below. This would not be a good place to meet any more energetic rats that might have ventured over the stream.

Which of course, was exactly where he met them.

A tall, thin rat blocked the trail in front of him. Although it was armed with a long, sharp stick, Otter was pretty sure he could take him on. If that didn't work, he

could always retreat back down the trail. Otter turned at the sound of falling rocks behind him. Another fatter rat slithered down the cliff face, blocking his exit.

Otter backed up against the rock face. The fat rat poked his stick at the sack.

“What’s in the sack?”

“None of your business,” growled Otter.

The skinny rat grinned, revealing a row of sharp yellow teeth. “In that case we’re eating roast otter tonight.” He raised the stick behind his head like a golf club.

Otter braced himself for the impact when skinny rat dropped his club and clutched his head. Otter looked up to see a brightly-coloured bird hovering above the rat.

“Woodpecker!”

Woodpecker swooped back down on the skinny rat, who was now cowering on the ground, covering his head with both paws. Fat rat had recovered from the surprise and swung at Woodpecker with his stick, which Woodpecker easily dodged.

“Run for it, Otter”! Shouted Woodpecker.

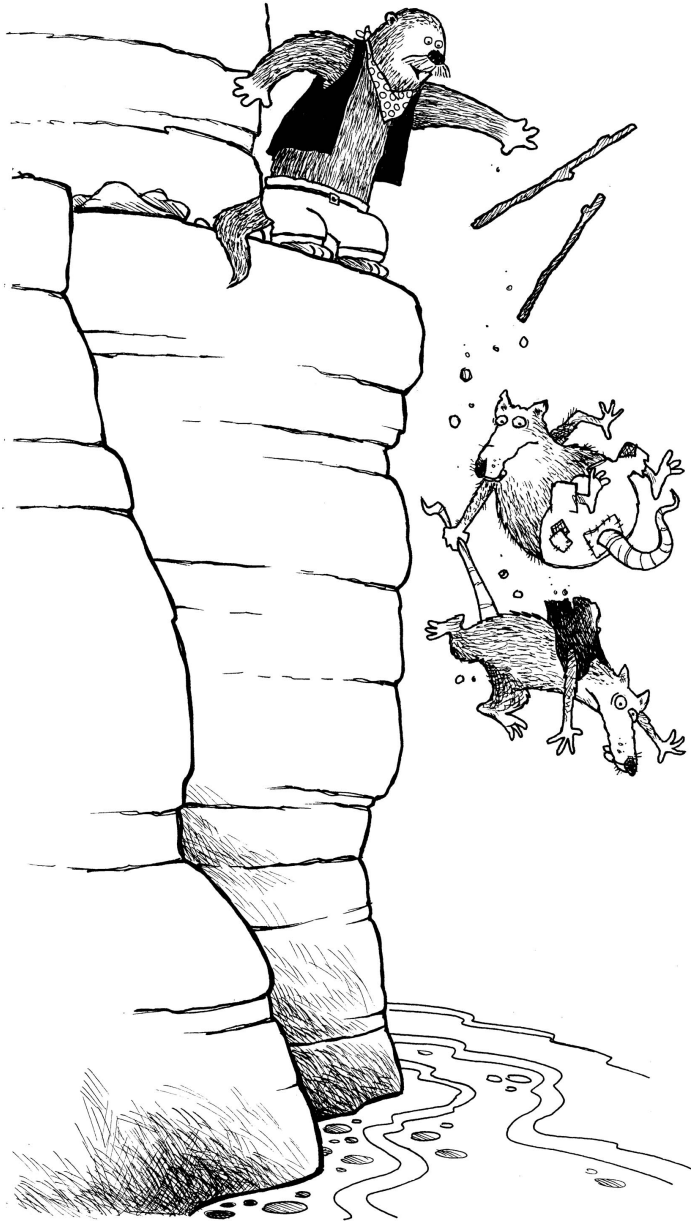
Otter put his head down and charged fat rat. The rat dodged to one side and leaped onto Otter’s back. Otter rolled over, trying to dislodge the rat, but it hung on, claws digging deep into his back.

Woodpecker tried to help Otter, but in the writhing mass of snarling hair and fur, he couldn’t make out which was rat and which was otter. Spotting a long mangy tail, Woodpecker swooped down, grabbed it in his beak and yanked hard. Fat rat yelped and released his grip on Otter at the same time skinny rat took a swing at

Woodpecker, missing and hitting fat rat instead. Howling, fat rat fell to the path and rolled. He grabbed the nearest thing to stop him falling off the cliff, which happened to be skinny rat’s tail. Otter seized the opportunity and aimed a kick at fat rat’s backside, sending them both flying over the edge to the stream below.

Both rats hit the water with satisfying splashes, surfaced, and as rats so often do, started fighting among themselves.

“You pulled my tail!”



“You were in the way!”

The sounds of bickering faded as they drifted off downstream.

Woodpecker landed on a rock in front of Otter. “I saw them climbing the bluffs ahead of you and thought you might need some help.”

Otter grinned. “I’m glad you did. I can usually smell them long before I see them. I guess I was upwind. But it explains why the ferry was on the other side of the stream. I thought they weren’t smart enough to know how to use a boat. Most unusual...”

They said their goodbyes and Otter continued along the path. Even though daylight was long gone, the moon was now over the

White Lion Mountains so he could see the trail quite clearly.

Along the way Otter reflected on what he had escaped from. Swamp rats were strange creatures. Vicious and sneaky, there were only two things they feared;

swoopers and mathematics.

Swoopers were what rats called eagles that rode the air currents looking for their next meal, with rat being a perfect addition to any



Swooper dinner table. And as rats weren't very good with numbers, they weren't sure how many hungry swoopers there were out there, but it was probably a lot.

If Woodpecker had not been so busy defending his friend up on the bluffs, he might have noticed a strange-looking vessel tucked in close to rocks that lined the stream downstream from the gorge. Only a few feet long, to a casual observer it looked like any model boat you might see in a park pond. But if you looked closer, there was something odd about this model... It was actually just a collection of rough boards lashed to dozens of empty plastic water bottles. At the stern of the vessel, a crudely painted board proudly announced her name was *Swamp Lady*, although there was nothing ladylike about her — or her crew, for that matter. They were a collection of mangy-looking rats, carrying sharpened sticks, clubs and an assortment of swords that looked like they were once tableware - and probably were. Standing at the bow of the boat was a large weasel, wearing a tattered coat that looked like it might have been made from the skin of various small animals. A rat seemed to be having an argument with the weasel; “But Weasel, we still haven't heard from our advance scouts at the Coldwater Canyon if it's safe to go any further!”

Weasel sucked his teeth and looked up the stream. “We can't wait, we must be through the Canyon before daylight. If not...”

Weasel leaned in to the rat, who recoiled more from the stench of rancid weasel breath, than from fear.

Weasel reached out a hairy paw and grabbed the rat by his shirt. Tears welled up in the rat's eyes, but wisely, he said nothing.

“... I will pull more than your shirt off you.”

Released from Weasel's grip, the rat scurried off, gulping in sweet, fresh air.

So, with much squeaking and grunting, *Swamp Lady* was pushed off from the bank and polled slowly upstream.



It was almost midnight by the time they reached the gorge and as it was dark, they didn't notice two very bedraggled rats standing shivering on the rocks, waving frantically at the raft. Even if they had been noticed, they probably wouldn't have stopped to pick them up, rats aren't very sympathetic creatures. Besides, they had a schedule to keep and no one wanted to make Weasel angry.



Much farther upstream and deep in the Black Maple woods, the only light reflecting off Coldwater Stream came from a small window carved into the clay riverbank beneath an old maple tree. Inside was a cozy little cottage with cedar bark carpets on the floor, a rickety kitchen table made from an old cable spool, and a bed made from willow branches. A comfy armchair that looked like it once belonged in a child's playroom was placed in front of a small stone fireplace, in which a log fire blazed merrily.

Otter poured a cup of dandelion tea, and peered into a shard of mirror to examine his ear. He picked up a pair of tweezers and carefully pulled out a tooth. "That's one less rat's tooth I have to worry about the next time I make that trip." Settling into his armchair he stuck a paw into the sack and rummaged around, pulling out a box of brass nails. "Raccoon will be happy to see these."

Next he pulled out a bag of clothes pins. "Miss Coyote has been waiting for these." He reached in again and pulled out an old Popular Mechanics magazine, studying the cover intently. "*Build your own backyard brick kiln. Build your own barbecue. Build your own railroad...*"

He opened the magazine, and turned to the railroad article, which showed photos of a miniature backyard railroad, with diagrams of switches, plans for stations and the plans for a fully working scale model steam locomotive!



By the time Otter finally finished reading, the fire had died down to embers and his mug of tea was cold. He put the magazine down and poked at the embers with a golf club.

“A railroad...”

He leaned back and closed his eyes. He’d first seen Faraway Farm when his father took him there when he was just a pup. For generations, the animals who lived in the Black Maple Woods had been farming; fruit, vegetables, corn, berries...Otter had tried his paw at growing tomatoes but the patch of ground in front of his cottage was too shaded for the tomatoes to fully ripen, so he turned to fishing. As they produced far more food than they could use, the animals traded with the couple who owned Faraway Farm, making the long trek through the woods to the farm, where they’d leave their produce in a shed, that was tucked away among the

bushes across from the farmhouse. There they'd pick up a list of produce the farmer wanted, and leave a list of what they wanted in return: nails, cloth, gardening tools, etc. carefully scrawled out by either Otter or Raccoon, who were the only ones among them who could (sortof) write, although Otter's spelling was often a little odd.

Unfortunately, the trail to Faraway Farm wound through the Lower Black Maple Woods, which was rat territory and numerous times they had been attacked by bands of hungry rats, who would rob them of the contents of their baskets, or worse, carry away smaller animals, who were never seen again.

Otter picked up the magazine again and looked at a photo of a model train. "If we had a railroad through the forest, just imagine how much easier it would be to get to Faraway Farm." He told himself.