

The Familiar

(A Delirium for a Plagued Planet)

By Fengar Gael

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“Nobody near me here but rats, and they are fine, stealthy, secret fellows.”

Charles Dickens

“I’ve often said that my rats have taught me much more than I’ve taught them.”

B. F. Skinner

CHARACTERS:

DOCTOR MARGOT PEMBERTON, a research virologist, age 50s

DORIAN (DORY) PEMBERTON, Margot's daughter, an aspiring artist, age 20s

BERNICE PEMBERTON, Margot's mother, a retired teacher, age 70s

DOCTOR RUFUS VOLMER, a psychotherapist, age 50s

GODREY MARSH, the Krishna Book Nook owner, age 30s

TIME:

During the height of the coronavirus pandemic.

PLACE:

New York City: a stylized set suggests an office, parlor, bookstore, and laboratory of caged rats.

SCENE 1

(DOCTOR RUFUS VOLMER is seated at his office desk as DOCTOR MARGOT PEMBERTON enters.)

MARGOT

Forgive the intrusion, Rufus, but your receptionist said you had a cancellation. I realize I'm taking advantage of our friendship, but I'm a desperate; my daughter needs help.

RUFUS

I'm sorry to hear that Margot, but it might be best if I recommend a colleague.

MARGOT

No! It has to be you! Dorian only agreed to see you, but only if you promise to take her seriously -- to step out of your comfort zone.

RUFUS

Well, I'll certainly try to be open minded.

MARGOT

You need to be more than open minded; you need to believe the impossible has as much right to exist as the possible.

RUFUS

Fine, but I'm not not a man of faith; I'm not religious or superstitious, so I tend to side with the possible.

MARGOT

So do I! (*she sighs*) Look, I hate being here. In my family to be sick was considered contemptible, but to be sick in the head was worse, and Dorian was always a poor specimen, coming too late in my life and too soon in hers. On top of her usual migraines, she caught covid last month, so she may be suffering from lingering effects.

RUFUS

Did she have a definite diagnosis?

MARGOT

Oh, yes, she tested positive and had a bout of encephalitis.

RUFUS

Was she hospitalized?

MARGOT

Yes. According to my mother who has a ghoulish fascination for all things medical, Dorian was lucky. She survived stage four which means she escaped the next stage which is...

MARGOT

...death.

BERNICE

Death...

(BERNICE PEMBERTON has appeared, in an agitated state.)

BERNICE

...was imminent! If only she'd been vaccinated! Why wasn't she?!

MARGOT

She's an adult; I expect her to be responsible for her own health.

BERNICE

If she were vaccinated, her infection would've ended by stage one. There are very distinct stages. Since you weren't here to witness their progression, would you care to hear them?

MARGOT

No!

BERNICE

Stage one: Dorian had increased trouble breathing so she ran to the nearest Urgent Care Clinic where she was diagnosed with hypoxia, then driven by ambulance to Manhattan General.

(Dim lights reveal DORIAN lying supine with an oxygen mask on her face.)

BERNICE

She was given steroids, anti-virals, and monoclonal antibodies, but when she continued to decline, she was transferred to the Intensive Care Unit where a ventilator pressured her lungs to pop open so she could breathe.

(DORIAN applies a bulkier mask with tubes to her face.)

BERNICE

At stage four the oxygen content of her blood was so perilously low she was sedated, intubated, connected to feeding and rectal tubes. Then you were phoned to make a difficult decision, and just as you decided to remove Dorian's tubes and proceed to palliative care, she rallied -- she survived!

(DORIAN flings aside the mask and tubes, then stands triumphant and flees.)

MARGOT

You make it sound like a miracle.

BERNICE

It was! It rarely happens but always renews my faith in divine intervention.

MARGOT

You mean you prayed...?

BERNICE

Oh, yes, I'm still a devout atheist, but lately find myself praying.

MARGOT

To which god...?

BERNICE

No god, just my angels. Anyway, I thought after a week of bedrest and meds, Dorian had completely recovered, but I'm afraid she's among the long haulers who continue to experience symptoms.

MARGOT

So how long are we talking about?

BERNICE

Who knows? Apparently each patient has her own version of this virus, so hang in there, dear, your daughter needs you.

(BERNICE departs as MARGOT turns to RUFUS.)

MARGOT

I'm ashamed to admit that at first I didn't believe it. I mean, how could a single virus possibly affect so many systems simultaneously? Of course I noticed Dorian was losing weight and looking worse than usual with her splotchy skin and unruly mop of hair. Most days she doesn't even bother with a comb never mind a clean shirt. And now to top everything else, she claims the virus enabled her to attract a familiar.

RUFUS

A familiar...?

MARGOT

That's right. A familiar is an invisible companion.

RUFUS

Yes, I know. I had a patient once, a self-proclaimed witch whose familiar took the shape of an Alaskan husky.

MARGOT

Yes, well, she insists she's being followed by...

MARGOT

...a rat.

DORIAN

A rat.

(DORIAN has reappeared wearing a careworn shirt and jeans.)

MARGOT

She named the rat after you,...

MARGOT

...Rufus.

DORIAN

Rufus...

DORIAN

...is his name, after Doctor Volmer.

RUFUS

Ha! Should I be flattered or offended...?

MARGOT

It depends on how you feel about rats.

RUFUS

I've killed a few, but I admire their tenacity.

MARGOT

It's my own fault. I've always kept my working life separate from my family, but last month Dorian asked to visit the lab. She's never had a rat phobia and has always defended them.

(RUFUS freezes in time as lights reveal shelves of rat filled cages and DORIAN turns to her mother.)

DORIAN

You realize you're exploiting a species that you'll never exterminate -- never! They're too smart and they're not hateful or disgusting.

MARGOT

I never said they were. Rats are actually quite clean, always grooming themselves and each other, and they can bond with humans which is why people keep them as pets. In fact, rats will rescue their fellow rats from drowning which some claim makes them empathetic.

DORIAN

What kind of rats are these?

MARGOT

Rattus Norvegicus, just your typical urban rats. They only weight sixteen ounces and the females can give birth to twelve litters a year with as many as twenty pups in each.

DORIAN

Wow, I'm impressed.

MARGOT

Rat math is mind boggling, so you're right about never exterminating them.

DORIAN

So can I have one? (*pointing*) There! That one's looking straight at me. He won't be missed.

MARGOT

Sorry, but he's one of ours, and you don't really want a rat as a pet. They don't live long -- only two years on average, but the real downside is they're full of pathogens.

DORIAN

But you just said they were clean.

MARGOT

Well, yes, by rat standards and to other rats, but to us they're full of e-coli, salmonella, bubonic plague, and dozens of diseases resistant to antibiotics. That said, they're incredible survivors; their immune systems adapt in ways that ours don't, and we want to know why.

DORIAN

So you infect and dissect them; you spend your days killing innocent creatures.

MARGOT

They're not that innocent; they're mostly intent on surviving. They'll eat anything living or dead, though they prefer high carb diets -- you know, pizza and pasta.

DORIAN

I don't see how you live with yourself.

MARGOT

I'm not sentimental; I don't anthropomorphize or endow them with feelings they don't have.

DORIAN

How do you know? You just said they bond with humans.

MARGOT

Not at a deep level.

(DORIAN departs as MARGOT returns to the present to face RUFUS.)

MARGOT

Dory's a devout animal advocate, always finding homes for strays, but this familiar's affecting her mental health. You can imagine how disconcerting it is to see her chatting with him, and since he's invisible to everyone else, she looks like one of those street people always muttering to themselves.

RUFUS

Does the rat appear to respond...?

MARGOT

Oh, yes, and there's something else that's disturbing. She claims her familiar has the power to attract other rodents.

RUFUS

Real or invisible?

MARGOT

Real, and I don't just mean just rats. We're talking mice, moles, gophers, and squirrels. I think Dory sees herself as a kind of Pied Piper and unfortunately some mice infested the house. Of course I laid down the law: I told her to get rid of them or move out! My mother was more generous; she suggested that Dory's familiar could be employed as...

MARGOT
...an exterminator.

BERNICE
An exterminator!

(BERNICE PEMBERTON reappears, seated in the parlor.)

BERNICE
Well, why not? Dory's little rat could lead his fellow rats out of buildings into traps to be euthanized.

DORIAN
No! Never! Jesus, Gran, I'd never kill another sentient creature, and I certainly don't aspire to being an exterminator!

BERNICE
I'm just trying to be practical. Surely you're aware that to most people rats are considered repulsive pests.

DORIAN
That's because most people are ignorant fools who don't care about anything but their own mutant species. *(to her familiar)* Come on, Rufus, these people will never understand.

(DORIAN stomps off as MARGOT turns to BERNICE.)

MARGOT
This is why I never wanted children; eventually you risk hating them.

BERNICE
You don't mean that, dear.

MARGOT
Oh, don't I? She's driving me crazy. Sometimes I actually think I hear a rat skittering behind her.

BERNICE
Oh, I hear him too.

MARGOT
You do? Seriously...?

BERNICE
Oh, yes, so cheer up. Now let's mix our martinis and you can make plans.

MARGOT

What plans?

BERNICE

To visit your friend, Rufus. He'll know what to do about Dorian.

(BERNICE departs as RUFUS turns to MARGOT.)

RUFUS

Do you think this familiar is the spawn of Dorian's imagination inspired by your lab rats or what...?

MARGOT

I don't know. I tried to make light of it and said I hoped her rat would morph into something friendlier, like a hamster or a cat.

(Now DORIAN reappears as MARGOT turns to her.)

MARGOT

Perhaps he'll eventually become a person -- a prince or a pauper. Of course, since he started out as a rat he might have a long nose and whiskers.

DORIAN

And a tail? I know you're making fun of me, but I'm serious.

MARGOT

So am I, and in the unlikely event that a man does materialize, what would you do with him?

DORIAN

If I liked him well enough, I'd invite him to stay in the guest room, and if he turns out to be a good companion, I might consider dating him.

MARGOT

So you'd have a mousy sort of man whom you created rather than one who's already survived childhood, been educated, and has a mind of his own. Of course, I see the advantage, but life would've been very dull if your father had always agreed with me.

DORIAN

Yeah, but maybe then you wouldn't have split and he'd still be alive.

MARGOT

We split because your father was too competitive.

DORIAN

Really...? You never told me that.

MARGOT

Then it's time I did. He left because he couldn't endure having a wife who made more money, received more grants, awards, and invitations to speak at prestigious universities. He should've married a shop clerk!

DORIAN

But then you wouldn't have had me.

MARGOT

That's true. *(pause)* So have you ever had a boy friend? You never talk about your personal life.

DORIAN

You never ask.

MARGOT

Because I don't want to pry; I don't even know if you've ever been kissed.

DORIAN

Yes, I've been kissed, but I've never met a boy I liked well enough to go beyond kissing which is why it's not a bad idea to create one of my own.

MARGOT

Well, if you succeed, let me know.

DORIAN

Okay. Come on, Rufee.

(DORIAN walks to skittering sounds as MARGOT faces RUFUS.)

MARGOT

For years, Christopher and I assumed that Dory was odd but not extraordinary. By the time she was in fifth grade we agreed she wasn't musical, intellectual or athletic, though she could sketch animals and liked to read fiction, but if you asked her if she wanted anything, she'd say no, nothing -- nothing! Not fame, not love or money, not even new clothes or an upgraded phone. How can a young American girl want nothing?! Naturally I suspected she was one of those affectless children on the autism spectrum, but now I wonder if she's finally sensed a void in her life and is filling it with this familiar.

RUFUS

Well, at least you've suggested she replace hrt rat with a more amiable creature.

MARGOT

Which reminds me of the reason I'm here. Believe it or not, Dory's invited a man for cocktails to meet mother and me and we wondered if you'd come as well. For all we know, he's a homeless vagrant or career criminal, but if you were there he'd be less likely to shoot us. I suppose I'm sounding paranoid.

RUFUS

A little.

MARGOT

He claims to have seen Dory's familiar.

RUFUS

Really...?

MARGOT

The truth is I blame myself. If I'd allowed her to have a real rat for a pet she wouldn't have needed a phantom one. *(pause, she sighs)* At least I'm finally admitting that I find my own child unlikeable -- from the time she was twelve. I realize I've just confessed my darkest secret, but I keep wondering if she's sensed my feelings and I've poisoned her emotionally. What if I've contributed to her delusion or even caused it?

RUFUS

I suppose it's possible, but it's natural to have conflicted feelings about one's children, especially as they mature.

MARGOT

To be honest, I never felt the kind of unconditional adoration parents are supposed to feel, and now I hate who she's become: a neurotic, rat-loving freak! Mother thinks I envy her youth, her energy and sexuality, but I don't! She's not attractive enough to envy; she's careless and lacks ambition -- not to mention taste in clothes and her table manners are atrocious! She's always rearranging her food, stabbing the potatoes as if they were going to leap off the plate! When she was younger I tried sending her off to summer camps, but she put up such a fuss I gave up. Anyway, now I regret taking her to the lab. Before that she'd always preferred cats and horses like any normal girl. *(she sighs)* And now this stranger is coming to meet us, so I thought a nice neutral buffer person like yourself might help us gain perspective. When I suggested that you join us, us, Dory said...

MARGOT

...yes!

DORIAN

Yes!

(DORIAN has reappeared.)

DORIAN

Rufus will like Godfrey; he'll understand.

MARGOT

Understand what?

DORIAN

His potential.

MARGOT

Potential for what?

DORIAN

For everything! Your problem is you don't see the genius in everyone; you see us like you see your rats -- as pathetic creatures competing for a chunk of the cheese.

MARGOT

That's not true, and patently unfair! Haven't I always treated you with respect? Haven't I framed and hung your paintings all over the walls?!

DORIAN

Yeah, but you don't like them; you think they're grotesque and derivative. I've heard you telling your friends on the phone.

MARGOT

Well, I'm sorry you heard that, but at least you can actually draw; most people can't.

DORIAN

And now I'm going to draw Rufus, then you can see what I see.

(DORIAN marches off as MARGOT turns to RUFUS.)

MARGOT

It seems obvious that this familiar is a hallucinatory aftereffect of her bout with Covid.

RUFUS

I'm inclined to agree. *(he sighs)* This virus can sneak past barriers that protect the brain from invasion. Either that or Dorian's own immune response could be overreacting, propelling proteins past her limbic system to her cerebral cortex.

MARGOT

(she sighs) Why is it that every year the world acquires another agent of chaos? If it isn't fires, floods, or rogue demagogues, it's another vicious plague. Sometimes I wish I were religious, then at least I could pray. *(pause)* So Rufus, will you join us for cocktails -- Friday around six? And if you think she's totally bonkers, you can't be afraid to tell me.

RUFUS

Margot, if there's one thing this job has taught me, it's that that everyone in the dark privacy of their thoughts is bonkers -- at least to some degree. I try not to judge, just help ease their anxiety. Most are pretty harmless -- unlike your rats.

MARGOT

Leave my rats alone! Besides lately they've been demoted by bats.

RUFUS

You know, I've always wondered what you do in your lab. You never talk about it, but since you work for the Defense Department, I imagine you're creating new pathogens to poison our enemies.

MARGOT

Before they poison us! Truth be told, that's exactly what we do, but less to kill than to arm ourselves with antidotes. I'm sure you've heard rumors that Covid came out of a lab in Wuhan, China. It's highly suspect and would be against the laws of the Geneva Convention, but some countries don't give a damn about laws.

RUFUS

It's very disconcerting to consider, so let's hope it wasn't intentional. *(he sighs)* What a world we've made.

MARGOT

Yeah, it's a real rat race, ha, ha!

(MARGOT'S laughter verges on hysteria as lights dim to the skitters of scurrying rats.)

SCENE 2

(A living room where BERNICE, RUFUS and MARGOT are seated drinking cocktails by a coffee table laden with a platter of cheese. DORIAN enters, pocketing her phone, then seats herself.)

DORIAN

Godfrey just texted to say he'll be late. (*pause, to Rufus*) I know mother's told you about my familiar. I named him after you.

RUFUS

So I've heard; I'm honored.

DORIAN

You should be. Rufus is super smart and even though he started out small, he seems to be growing.

RUFUS

So you've actually seen him...?

DORIAN

He flickers in and out depending on my moods which makes me think he's feeds on fear.

RUFUS

How do you mean?

DORIAN

When I feel my panic attacks coming on, he appears and makes them disappear.

RUFUS

If that's true, I could use him in my practice, but how exactly does he make your attacks disappear?

DORIAN

Have you ever heard a rat sing?

RUFUS

They squeak don't they?

DORIAN

Not Rufus. He hums a melody that makes my heart beat slower and soon I'm okay again.

RUFUS

Tell me, is he here now?

DORIAN

Yes.

BERNICE

I don't see him.

MARGOT

Neither do I.

RUFUS

(to Dorian) Do you?

DORIAN

No, but I sense his presence. I think he needs to be fed to gain the strength to materialize. Whenever I leave a plate of food on my bedroom floor, it's always gone by morning.
(pause, to Rufus) I suppose you think rats are disgusting.

RUFUS

No, they never repulsed me the way snakes do, though I respect their lofty place in the pantheon of pestilent creatures.

DORIAN

At least you don't kill them for a living.

MARGOT

Rufus is well aware that certain creatures are sacrificed for the benefit of science. We collect their blood and saliva for our library of viruses. That way when the next pandemic comes along, we can identify and treat it.

DORIAN

Since pandemics originate in animals, maybe it's their revenge on humans for polluting the planet.

(Skittering sounds are heard as RUFUS leaps up.)

RUFUS

Oh, god! I...I just felt something at the back of my foot.

DORIAN

It's probably Rufus. I have a feeling he likes you which makes you the first person he's shown any interest in.

(RUFUS reseats himself.)

RUFUS

So why is it I felt him but can't see him?

DORIAN

Maybe because he only has enough energy to be felt, but when he pulls himself together he can move things like slippers and tea cups.

BERNICE

I'd like to see that.

MARGOT

So would I.

DORIAN

All right, watch this.

(DORIAN finishes drinking her wine, then sets her glass on the floor and addresses her familiar.)

DORIAN

Now Rufus, first I want you to meet your namesake, Doctor Rufus Volmer, and now I want you to show us how you can knock over my wine glass.

(Pause as THEY stare, focused on the wine glass.)

BERNICE

Well, dear, we're waiting.

DORIAN

Oh, come on, Rufus, knock down the glass!

BERNICE

Maybe he's not in the mood.

DORIAN

Please Rufus! *(she sighs)* Sometimes he's too shy to perform.

MARGOT

Then he's not like the rats I know. Most are bold, greedy beasts without guile. In fact, they're so prolific they could become rampant over the entire planet. Even if we declare an all-out war on them, we'll never eliminate every single rat.

DORIAN

So instead you torture them.

MARGOT

That's right, so at least their numbers are limited.

BERNICE

You know, Dory dear, most people don't care for rats. We all have our phobias and the very idea of rats scurrying about makes me break out in a cold sweat. *(to Margot)* Fortunately, phobias aren't hereditary. *(to Margot)* You don't have any, do you?

(MARGOT doesn't reply.)

BERNICE

Well, do you, dear?

MARGOT

Actually, I'm not fond of heights and *(to Dorian)* your father was terrified of spiders and avoided elevators.

BERNICE

What about you, Dorian?

DORIAN

Needles. I've always been afraid of needles.

BERNICE

I thought you'd outgrown that! Is that why you neglected to be vaccinated?

DORIAN

Yeah, I guess was waiting for someone to invent an alternative like pills, but while I was in the hospital, the nurses jabbed me every day and it wasn't so bad.

BERNICE

Good! We wouldn't want to lose you because of a foolish phobia. Now what about you, Rufus, what's your phobia?

RUFUS

I suppose I fear failure. As a student, I felt I had to read more, study harder, check and recheck every source or risk being left behind. Of course, I eventually came to realize that intellectual and emotional setbacks aren't so terrible. In fact, they're necessary for a person to mature.

BERNICE

Yet you still fear failure...?

RUFUS

Yes, but now I fear failing my patients, though so far I haven't killed any -- at least none that I know of.

DORIAN

I can't imagine that. You're one of the kindest, most open-minded people I know -- my favorite of mom's friends, and now that we're all together, I have an announcement to make.

(Pause as DORIAN takes a deep breath.)

MARGOT

We're all ears.

BERNICE

What is it...?

DORIAN

I have a job! At the Krishna Kollektive Book Nook!

RUFUS

Congratulations!

BERNICE

Why, that's wonderful, dear!

MARGOT

So do they specialize in astrology and organic mushrooms?

BERNICE

Or religion. Isn't Krishna a god?

DORIAN

He's the incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu who was a warrior and philosopher.

RUFUS

I know the place; they have a good selection of novels as well as nonfiction books on history, politics, philosophy...

MARGOT

(interrupting) How much are they paying you?!

DORIAN

Just minimum wage to start and I'm only working weekends, but the owner said it could lead to more hours. Most of the time I'll be pressing price stickers on covers and wheeling trolleys of books between aisles for shelving.

BERNICE

I've always loved bookstores!

MARGOT

When do you start?

DORIAN

Next Saturday.

BERNICE

So will you be bringing your little familiar to work?

DORIAN

I don't have much choice; I can't just banish him. Believe me, I've tried and he refuses to leave.

BERNICE

Well, as long as he doesn't get in the way.

MARGOT

You'd better stop talking to him or you won't last a day.

RUFUS

Is it possible that you don't really want to get rid of him?

DORIAN

Maybe. I guess I'd miss his loyalty, and I can't help but see myself in him.

MARGOT

Oh, please! You see yourself in a rat?!

DORIAN

Only because he's usually invisible.

MARGOT

So you feel invisible...?

DORIAN

Sometimes. *(pause)* Look, I don't expect you to believe me, but when I applied for the job, something incredible happened. At first the owner asked me about myself so I told him I painted. Then he asked to see my work which is why I invited him here.

BERNICE

What if he's married? Should we have invited a wife?

DORIAN

I don't think so.

RUFUS

You mentioned that something incredible happened. What was it?

DORIAN

He noticed.

(RUFUS, MARGOT and BERNICE freeze as DORIAN evokes the past standing in the bookstore as GODFREY MARSH approaches.)

GODFREY

I think you're being followed.

DORIAN

Oh, god! I mean how...? How did you know?

GODFREY

Something's been trailing you all over the shop.

DORIAN

Yes, he's my...my familiar, a rat named Rufus. You're the only other person who's ever seen him -- now I can't even see him.

GODFREY

Well, neither can I. To be honest, you kept turning around, looking behind your back at the floor so I assumed there was something I should've seen, and then I saw or thought I saw a small scurrying shadow, but it faded.

DORIAN

That's Rufus! My mom thinks he's a weird side effect from when I nearly died of Covid. She makes me think I'm insane and maybe I am, so whoever you are, thanks for noticing.

GODFREY

I'm Godfrey.

DORIAN

I'm Dorian.

GODFREY

So he just follows you...?

DORIAN

Yeah, he's a great listener.

GODFREY

Ha, ha! Frankly I think you're amazing. He would've driven most people to a padded cell in Bellevue. So have you ever actually seen him...?

DORIAN

Only twice at night when I couldn't sleep and turned on the light. Then I saw him scurry under the bed.

GODFREY

You're sure it was him and not some city rat?

DORIAN

Yeah, I'm sure.

GODFREY

I can't help but wonder why you have a rat for a familiar? Why not a friendlier mammal?

DORIAN

Rats can be friendly, but Rufus didn't appear until I saw where my mom works. She's a scientist, a virologist who keeps them in cages to study their immunity to diseases like bubonic plague. It was after I left her lab that Rufus followed me home.

GODFREY

That must've been disconcerting.

DORIAN

Yeah, it was scary 'cause I sensed him but couldn't see him. It turns out phantom followers are called familiars. They originate from spirits disguised as animals that latch on to susceptible people.

GODFREY

Well, Dorian, you're certainly unique. I mean how many people are lucky enough to have a familiar?

DORIAN

But what good is he? I mean his tricks aren't going to save the world. He can't even speak much less offer any affection. Of course if someone could train him, set him loose on perverts and criminals, they might think they're losing their minds, but that would be cruel so that's why I usually don't tell people. They might want to steal him.

GODFREY

So you're protective of him...?

DORIAN

I'm just glad he hasn't escaped. In fact, I'm planning to paint him to remember what he looks like in case he does.

GODFREY

Doesn't he look like any old rat?

DORIAN

No, his ears are larger, his tail longer, and his fur's so black it's blue. He's quite unique.

GODFREY

Like you.

DORIAN

Not really. I was an average student, a lousy athlete, and a disappointment to my mother who thinks my paintings are mediocre and proof of a sick mind.

GODFREY

Can I see them?

DORIAN

(pause) Well, okay. I've got some on my phone, but I should warn you, they're creepy.

(DORIAN pulls out her phone and swipes photos of her paintings as GODFREY smiles.)

GODFREY

Oh, Dory, Dory...

DORIAN

What...?

GODFREY

These are terrific! You're the real deal, a genuine original!

DORIAN

The subject matter doesn't bother you...?

GODREY

Not at all. I like that the features are magnified and every whisker curled, the tails corkscrewing right off the canvas. Who knew rodents could look so...radiant?

DORIAN

But they're still rodents. *(pause)* After my dad died, my mom sent me to a shrink who said I internalized his meanness, so he's buried in my brain and reflected in my paintings. When I told her about my familiar, she said he's probably a manifestation of my low self esteem which is why he's a rat instead of a cat.

GODFREY

So your father wasn't fatherly?

DORIAN

Sometimes, but when he drank, he'd call me Dorky instead of Dory. At least he never hit me like he did my mom.

GODFREY

Did she call the police?

DORIAN

No, but one day while he was at work, we packed our suitcases and took a cab to my grandmother's house.

GODFREY

Did he ever try to contact you?

DORIAN

No, my mom threatened to shoot him if he did, but sometimes I tracked him on the Internet, back when he was teaching his gullible students who still think he's god.

GODFREY

(pause) Well, it sounds like he was lacking in kindness -- unlike you.

DORIAN

How would you know? We've just met.

GODFREY

I just know how you make me feel: safe and unself-conscious.

DORIAN

But I don't. I feel small and intimidated, like you're superior and think I'm interesting the way lab rats are interesting to my mom.

GODFREY

I'm sorry you feel that way because I admire your talent and think these paintings deserve to be hung in a gallery. Have you ever had a show?

DORIAN

No.

GODFREY

Would you consider hanging them here?

DORIAN

Here? On the walls...?

GODFREY

In the entrance and up the staircase.

DORIAN

Are you serious...?

GODFREY

Sure, I'll talk to my cousin, Glenda. We're co-owners.

DORIAN

You're kidding? You *own* this place...?

GODFREY

That's right. Here's my card.

(GODFREY draws a card from his pocket and hands it to DORIAN.)

GODFREY

Now please, send pictures of your work to my e-mail address so I can show Glenda. If she approves, we'll display them for our customers, and you can put prices on them if you want.

DORIAN

Wow, I...I've never sold a painting before. I've given a few away, but never thought anyone would actually pay money for them.

GODFREY

And yet you framed them...?

DORIAN

Not me, my mom did that. She even hung one in her office even though she doesn't really like them.

GODFREY

That's too bad. She should've encouraged you to contact a gallery or create your own website.

DORIAN

She likes that I don't care about being rich or famous. She says I have purity of purpose which gives me the freedom to become original. She says if I'm serious about being an artist I have to...

DORIAN

...make a choice.

MARGOT

Make a choice!

(MARGOT reappears in the past.)

MARGOT

Do you want to corrupt your sensibilities by becoming a competitive careerist or do you want to become an authentic original -- celebrated even after death.

DORIAN

So I can't be both...?

MARGOT

Not if you're starting out, and not while you're still in the process of creating a style which may someday evolve into something unlike any ever seen. I've visited enough galleries to know when I'm seeing something unique or something banal and derivative, so my advice is to keep painting and see what transpires.

DORIAN

But for now you think I'm banal and derivative..?

MARGOT

Well,...yes. Of course you may secretly hope for recognition, even fame, but that should come without asking.

DORIAN

But I'm not asking.

MARGOT

Good! Now I think it's time you found a part time job that gets you out of the house. You need to start socializing with other people, and if you're going to continue painting, you might want to consider pursuing more pleasurable subjects.

DORIAN

You mean like seagulls and puppies, or maybe I should paint you. I could title it "The Rat Catcher."

MARGOT

Sorry, but I'm much too busy to pose.

DORIAN

Then I'll paint you from memory or take a picture.

(DORIAN whips out her phone.)

MARGOT

What are you doing?!

(DORIAN snaps a picture.)

MARGOT

Stop it! Stop this instant!

DORIAN

Sorry.

MARGOT

I'm serious, I forbid you to paint me!

DORIAN

Why?

MARGOT

Because I said so!

DORIAN

Because you don't trust me to make you beautiful?

MARGOT

That's right; you might see me as I am.

DORIAN

You mean as an assassin of innocent creatures...?

MARGOT

Among other things.

DORIAN

But I also see you as a scientist who might someday save the world.

MARGOT

Ha! Oh, my dear, if you only knew...

(Lights alter as MARGOT vanishes and GODFREY reappears in the bookshop.)

GODFREY

I think your paintings will sell. In fact, I want the one with the rats circling the planet, though I'm not sure what it means.

DORIAN

It means that rats will win. Someday they'll spread lethal pathogens that kill enough humans to save the world from our toxic fossil fuels.

GODFREY

But you don't really think the rats will win, do you?

DORIAN

I don't have much to say about it, but since we deserve it, I don't really care.

GODFREY

You don't care if you and your friends die?

DORIAN

I guess I would if I had any friends beside my Gran and a shrink who's a friend of my mom's.

GODFREY

Oh...? Is he treating you?

DORIAN

No, though I once heard my mom say I wasn't sufficiently nurtured as a child which is why I'm the way I am.

GODFREY

You seem fine to me, though I wonder what inspired you to become an artist?

DORIAN

I guess 'cause I wasn't interested in becoming like my parents, and when I paint it helps me focus and forget all the bad news on my phone, but a plain white canvas that needs filling is something I can face.

GODFREY

Well, that makes perfect sense. *(pause)* If you don't mind my asking, do you still live with your mother?

DORIAN

Yeah, we're staying at my gran's.

GODFREY

How's that working out?

DORIAN

Okay, but I don't have much choice since I can't afford a place of my own.

GODFREY

You will if you sell enough paintings.

DORIAN

Yeah, or if I get a job. I notice you have a sign in the window. Are you still looking for a part time clerk?

GODFREY

Why? Are you interested?

DORIAN

Absolutely! I don't have any experience but I learn fast, plus I'm good at math and read lots of books I can recommend to your customers -- the ones who like fiction from the classics like Dickens and Trollope to Egan, Erdrich, Ishiguro, and everything in the window. I've read them all!

GODFREY

(pause) I'll have to speak to Glenda and we'll need your resume and letters of recommendation.

DORIAN

Oh. *(pause)* Look, I've never had a real job before so I don't have any letters and the trouble with my resume is that it's just my academic history which ended when I dropped out of college and doesn't reflect my talents, so I guess you'd be taking a risk with me.

GODFREY

Why did you drop out of college?

DORIAN

I guess I was restless and just needed to be left alone to paint and read what I wanted.

GODFREY

(pause) Would you be willing to work a few hours next weekend -- as a kind of trial?

DORIAN

Sure.

GODFREY

Will Rufus be coming along?

DORIAN

Yeah, but I can ignore him. *(pause)* Since you like my paintings, would you like to come by my place and see some more? I only live two blocks away and you can meet my mom. She'll want to approve my job prospects.

GODFREY

Aren't you old enough to make your own decisions?

DORIAN

Yeah, but since Covid she's become hyper-protective, so how about tomorrow at six for drinks -- just so she can see you're not an axe murderer. Then you can escape.

GODFREY

Well,...

DORIAN

Oh, please, please come!

GODFREY

I...I suppose I could...

DORIAN

Just say yes!

GODFREY

All right, yes.

DORIAN

Tomorrow at six!

(DORIAN draws a notebook from her purse, scribbles on a page, tears it out and hands it to GODFREY.)

DORIAN

Here's my address and number. Don't forget!

GODFREY

Right.

(GODFREY vanishes as DORIAN returns to the living room sofa.)

DORIAN

I really thought he'd come. *(pause)* Men! I hate them! No wonder women become lesbians; women are more reliable, not to mention smarter, kinder, humbler. *(to Rufus)* That doesn't include you, but you're...exceptional.

RUFUS

Ha! Look, why don't you text him to see if he's lost or maybe he forgot.

MARGOT

Or maybe he doesn't exist; maybe Godfrey's like your familiar and only visible to you.

BERNICE

Nonsense! People are very forgetful these days. It's because of Covid; isn't that true, Rufus?

RUFUS

Yes, in fact one of my patients keeps driving to meetings he's already attended. Covid can infect the amygdala which controls brain functions, including memory. The trouble is people working from home can lose their sense of time which was connected to their schedules and commutes.

MARGOT

Well, it's rude not to call. If he does show up, I hope he has a damn good excuse!

BERNICE

(to Dorian) Why don't you do what Rufus suggested and text him?

(As DORIAN takes out her phone, the doorbell rings and SHE rushes to answer as BERNICE whispers to RUFUS.)

BERNICE

Ah! Now we'll finally meet Dory's mystery man.

SCENE 3

(DORIAN reappears with GODFREY.)

DORIAN

Godfrey, may I present my mother, my grandmother and our friend, Doctor Rufus Volmer.

GODFREY

Hello.

MARGOT

Hello, Godfrey.

BERNICE

It's a pleasure to meet you!

(RUFUS stands to shake GODFREY'S hand.)

RUFUS

How do you do?

GODFREY

Fine, thanks.

BERNICE

Please sit here, and let me pour you a glass of wine.

GODFREY

Thank you. Please forgive me for being late; we had an incident at the store.

BERNICE

Nothing too traumatic I hope.

GODFREY

The theft of a book, but the thief was caught on our surveillance cameras.

MARGOT

Did you call the police?

GODFREY

No, she turned out to be a regular customer who'd lost her job. She was desperate to escape into the fictional world of the latest Tessa Hadley novel. She always paid before so I let her take the book on credit. Apparently this was her first and only offense. She said she'd never stolen anything in her life.

MARGOT

And you believed her?

GODFREY

Yes, I did.

MARGOT

Then you're a gullible fool.

DORIAN

Mother!

MARGOT

You should've told her to join a library, then called the police. You could've taught her to be responsible for the consequences of her actions. Don't you agree, Rufus?

RUFUS

Yes, but Godfrey chose to show compassion instead. We can't forget that these are challenging times and some people are prone to act impulsively.

DORIAN

And Godfrey has a heart.

MARGOT

Good for him. *(to Godfrey)* Now I must ask you to verify Dorian's claim that you've actually seen her familiar.

GODFREY

Well, yes, but not clearly; it was more of a brief shadow.

MARGOT

A shadow shaped like a rodent...?

GODFREY

Yes, but it faded as quickly as it came.

BERNICE

Imagine being able to control when you cast a shadow!

MARGOT

Not the most useful talent, *(to Godfrey)* and I think you're a liar.

DORIAN

Mother! Jesus...

MARGOT

Sorry, I just don't believe you. I think you saw a vulnerable young woman glancing behind her as if she was seeing something and decided to play along.

BERNICE

Now, Margot dear, let's not be rude. You know there's a theory that familiars can embody any shape they wish, so I suspect their shadows would reflect their shapes which is what Godfrey may have seen.

MARGOT

Since when did you become an expert on familiars?

BERNICE

Oh, I'm hardly an expert; I just did some research and apparently familiars are demonic spirits that disguise themselves in the form of animals.

MARGOT

Well, I also did some research and it's superstitious bullshit! In fact, I suspect Dorian's having a hearty laugh at our expense.

DORIAN

No, never! And Rufus is not demonic! He's harmless and even though he's only been with me a short time, I can't imagine life without him.

MARGOT

Real or imagined, the question remains: what good is he?

DORIAN

Does he have to be good at something? Does everything and everyone always have to be a means to an end?

MARGOT

If they want to be useful, then yes, but we're talking about a rat. At least mine are sacrificing themselves to benefit humanity. What does yours do?

DORIAN

I'm just starting to find out, but I sense that he's not unlike your own rats -- a sentient creature with feelings, and beyond that he can change the temperature. (*glancing down*) Rufus, do that trick where you make it cool.

(Pause as a high pitched wind resounds.)

DORIAN

Do you hear that?

BERNICE

Hear what?

DORIAN

The wind!

BERNICE

No, dear, I don't.

RUFUS

Sorry.

MARGOT

No!

DORIAN

Well, can you feel it?

BERNICE

Afraid not.

MARGOT

No.

GODFREY

Not really.

DORIAN

Go on, Rufus, make it cold -- bitter cold!

(The wind sounds increase as GODFREY shivers and BERNICE rubs her arms.)

BERNICE

Oh, heavens, I need a sweater!

GODFREY

Incredible!

BERNICE

Can he make it snow?

MARGOT

(to Bernice) Oh for godssake!

BERNICE

Never mind, it would ruin the rugs.

MARGOT

Stop it, Dorian! Stop it this instant!

DORIAN

Rufus, make it warm again.

BERNICE

Not too warm, just the way it was.

(Pause as BERNICE, GODFREY and RUFUS cease shivering and the wind subsides.)

BERNICE

(pause) Ahhhh, yes, that's pleasant.

GODFREY

It's beyond pleasant; it's incredible! This trick could change everything!

DORIAN

Not really. I mean, Rufus can't cool the planet if that's what you're thinking. I hoped so at first, but he can only cool one room at a time and only for a few minutes.

BERNICE

Still, it's quite an accomplishment. You're so fortunate, dear, to have your very own familiar. Don't you think so Rufus?

RUFUS

I'm not sure what to think.

BERNICE

Well, I think it's a gift dear, but sometimes gifts exact a price. You're at the age at which girls start to show their true colors and I always suspected you might be extraordinary.

DORIAN

You did...?

GODFREY

So Dorian, do we all have familiars or just you? I mean, is it possible our's just haven't revealed themselves.

DORIAN

All I know is that mine's a recent arrival, or maybe I wasn't aware of him until recently. I think you and Gran are the only ones in this room who don't think I'm insane.

RUFUS

That's because your mother and I are experiencing cognitive dissonance. We're being confronted by evidence of something we didn't believe could exist.

BERNICE

You know, dear, your familiar reminds me of when I was a girl at Holy Trinity Grammar School. We were told we each had a guardian angel who was always with us, protecting us from harm. I named mine Agatha after the patron saint of nurses. I tested her once and crossed the street when a cyclist was coming straight at me.

DORIAN

What happened?

BERNICE

He hit me and I fell and fractured my wrist, but Margot, dear, you never had a guardian angel, did you?

MARGOT

Only you, mother.

BERNICE

Oh, I wasn't much of an angel. By the time I had you, I'd given up on religion. Truth be told, I wasn't an ideal doting mother which is why you're the way you are. The trouble is I loved your father so exclusively I didn't pay enough attention when it mattered most.

MARGOT

So what...? You think I'm a failure?

BERNICE

Heavens no! I'm only saying you could've used an angel or familiar. You have to admit since Dorian acquired her rat, she's been happier. She speaks above a whisper and smiles more, and now she even has a gentleman caller.

DORIAN

Godfrey's not a caller! He's just here to see my paintings. (*mumbling to Godfrey*) Sorry...

GODFREY

Dorian's right, I'm hoping to to hang a few in the shop.

BERNICE

Oh, how marvelous!

GODFREY

(*to Margot*) I hope you don't mind.

MARGOT

Of course not! There's no need to ask my permission; Dorian's an adult who can do whatever she likes with her paintings. In fact, I think it's good for her to be working at a bookstore or any place that keeps her interacting with people beside family.

DORIAN

Great! Now that's settled, Godfrey can go home.

BERNICE

Oh, must you leave? Have another drink, dear

(BERNICE pours more wine into Godfrey's glass, then MARGOT snatches the bottle and pours more into her own glass.)

BERNICE

Now tell us about yourself, Godfrey. I assume you're a reader of books, but did you ever aspire to writing one?

GODFREY

As a matter of fact, I'm writing a novel inspired by the effects of the pandemic on the creative lives of people like Dorian.

BERNICE

Will you include Dorian's familiar?

GODFREY

Only if she doesn't mind, and I hope she'll consider illustrating the cover.

DORIAN

Oh, wow, sure; that would be great -- thanks.

MARGOT

Assuming your book's ever published, in what section would we find it? Fantasy or science fiction?

GODFREY

Probably neither but it's too soon to tell.

BERNICE

So did you give the shop its name?

GODFREY

No, the original owner was a Hindu convert.

BERNICE

And you weren't inspired to change it?

GODFREY

Not yet, especially since the store came with a loyal clientele and a book club that meets on Thursdays.

BERNICE

Oh, how nice! What are they reading?

GODFREY

Because of the pandemic, they've been reading The Plague, The Andromeda Strain, and this month it's Love in the Time of Cholera.

BERNICE

That's one of my favorites! Now Dorian, what are you going to do if your little rat runs loose, knocking books off shelves and terrifying customers.

DORIAN

Rufus wouldn't do that!

BERNICE

How do you know?

DORIAN

I...I don't, but I sense that he's not mischievous. He's just...

MARGOT

A rat!

DORIAN

That's right, and since he didn't make an appearance until I visited your lab, maybe one of yours gave birth to mine.

MARGOT

But why would you acquire a phantom rat while someone like me who's spent years among them hasn't?

DORIAN

I haven't a clue.

BERNICE

Maybe you're not as spiritual as Dorian. She's always had her head in the clouds, and judging by her paintings, I imagine she reveres life in all its forms. So even though she's made her rats homely, they're also...fanciful. Don't you think so, Godfrey?

GODFREY

Yes, I do.

BERNICE

Dory sees all creatures as her companions on earth, don't you, dear?

MARGOT

Oh, please, and Dory can speak for herself.

DORIAN

Actually, Gran expressed my feelings very well.

MARGOT

Fine but some creatures are dangerous, even malevolent, and at the end of the day the toxic ones look just like the friendly ones, don't they, Rufus?

RUFUS

Are we talking about animals or human beings? Of course with humans, the guilty can look like the innocent; some are benign while others are driven by fear, envy, and revenge.

DORIAN

Yes, and we have to protect ourselves from becoming like them.

MARGOT

Dorian's afraid she'll become like her mother, but trust me, she won't. She doesn't have the ambition or the energy, and I'm not at all convinced she has the talent which is why she's chosen the arts as opposed to the sciences -- the easy way out.

BERNICE

Margot!

MARGOT

But Dorian's the sort of person who's likely to fall through the cracks, to be acceptable, pleasing to some, but not quite original or self promoting enough to register an impression much less be remembered.

BERNICE

(to Dorian) I'm afraid your mother's had too much to drink!

(GODFREY stands.)

GODFREY

Come on, Dory, I think it's time we left.

BERNICE

Oh, no, please stay! Margot didn't mean to chase you away, did you dear?

MARGOT

No, of course not! Sorry, I was just stating a worst case scenario. *(to Dorian)* I know you want to succeed, and you may be talented, but really successful people tend to be obsessed with their art, their careers. *(to Godfrey)* Whatever you give them -- kindness, empathy, love -- they may not be capable of giving back. The reason I know this is because I never gave Dorian enough when it mattered, though sometimes nature overcomes lack of nurture, isn't that right, Rufus?

RUFUS

Yes, and now I think you've said enough.

MARGOT

You mean you've heard enough.

RUFUS

That's right, so I'd better be going.

MARGOT

Oh, no, please stay! I realize I'm behaving badly, but you don't know what I know. *(whispering)* Dorian's plotting her revenge.

DORIAN

What...?!

MARGOT

She's plotting to break into the lab, open the cages, and set my rats free!

DORIAN

No way! That's crazy!

MARGOT

Then why did you write it in your diary?!

DORIAN

Because I knew you were reading it!

MARGOT

(pause) Oh.

(MARGOT bites her lower lip.)

BERNICE

Shame on you, Margot!

MARGOT

How did you...?

DORIAN

Because somebody moved my bookmark and it could only be you!

MARGOT

(pause) Oh, say something Rufus!

RUFUS

Obviously, Dory's well aware that your rats contain dangerous pathogens, and she isn't irresponsible or willing to risk another pandemic on top of the ones we've already had.

MARGOT

Ha! I think she'd like to see me ruined.

DORIAN

I'm right here, mother, so stop talking like I'm not, and I'd never want to see you ruined!

RUFUS

Why do you think that? Has Dory ever treated you with disrespect?

DORIAN
No!

MARGOT
No,...

MARGOT
...not overtly because she's shrewd, cunning as a fox, and deranged from lack of oxygen.

DORIAN
What...?

BERNICE
Margot!

MARGOT
I'm serious! *(to Rufus)* When Dorian was discharged from the hospital, she required supplemental oxygen and was lugging around thirty pound tanks until her lungs were able to function adequately. She hasn't been the same since; I know it and so does she.

DORIAN
That's not true! I'm fine, better than ever!

MARGOT
Except for seeing things that aren't there!

DORIAN
Come on, Godfrey, let's go!

(DORIAN and GODFREY stand, preparing to leave.)

BERNICE
It was a pleasure meeting you, Godfrey.

(DORIAN glances about.)

DORIAN
Wait! Where's Rufus?

GODFREY
You don't see...?

DORIAN
No! Where is he?!

GODFREY
He'll find you, let's go!

DORIAN

I can't leave him here! Rufus!!! Ruuuuu!

GODFREY

Come on, Dory, please let's go!

(GODFREY grasps DORIAN'S hand and THEY depart.)

SCENE 4

(MARGOT pours herself more wine, then turns to RUFUS.)

MARGOT

You saw what I saw so tell me she isn't batshit crazy?!

RUFUS

I'm withholding judgment and you really should stop being so critical; it's not healthy.

MARGOT

Your problem is you still see Dorian as a modest little mouse, but you don't know what she's become; you don't know how to look at her paintings.

RUFUS

Or read her diary?! *(pause)* When I look at Dorian's paintings I see fanciful, well drawn tributes to some of our lowliest, least loved creatures.

MARGOT

But where are the teeth? All her rats are toothless and yet their bites can pierce wood. To me her paintings are ludicrous -- chubby little rodents romping in fields of poppies, but a rat's idea of heaven would be a tipped over garbage can. They're opportunistic scavengers; in fact, they're like humans in that they really just want to eat, sleep, breed and live in peace. Of course being part of a predatory system, they risk being attacked by hawks and snakes. Speaking of predators, what did you think of Godfrey?

BERNICE

Oh, he's quite dashing, isn't he?

MARGOT

So what does he want with Dorian?

BERNICE

He obviously admires her talent.

RUFUS

Tell me, Margot, why do you have this inability to believe in benign motives, and do you seriously find your own daughter so unattractive?

MARGOT

Well,...yes. In fact, ever since her acquisition of a phantom rat, I have this fantasy of shipping her off to a retreat somewhere.

BERNICE

RUFUS

(mumbling) Oh, Margot... So you freely admit you have a daughter you've come to regret.

MARGOT

I know it's not her fault. *(she sighs)* I've tried but I'm just not motherly, and having a child with a bastard who abandoned us hasn't helped.

RUFUS

But Dorian's not him; she's her own unique self, and since you freely admit you don't feel motherly then why not encourage her to find a place of her own?

BERNICE

That's a brilliant idea! *(to Margot)* She needs to be someplace you can't...discourage her.

MARGOT

What...? How do I discourage her?!

BERNICE

You make her self-conscious.

MARGOT

You mean I expect too much, but never mind that. The fact is she can't afford a place of her own.

BERNICE

No, but *you* can, and if you can't, I can!

MARGOT

(pause, she sighs) You're right of course. The daughter I wanted would've been a miracle of a girl: a beauty with brains, a devoted scientist, a discoverer of cures for cancers and plagues, and instead I spawned a painter.

BERNICE

An artist!

MARGOT

A deluded dilettante who has you all in her thrall.

RUFUS

How do you know she's a dilettante? Since when did you become an art critic?

MARGOT

Since when did you?! *(to Bernice)* And you!

BERNICE

Oh, Margot, shush! And stop drinking! You don't look well; let me feel your forehead.

(BERNICE approaches MARGOT.)

MARGOT

Go away; I'm fine!

RUFUS

No, she's right; you look flushed. Here let me.

(RUFUS feels MARGOT'S forehead.)

RUFUS

You're feverish.

BERNICE

I'll get the thermometer.

MARGOT

Don't bother; I never felt better.

RUFUS

You've been vaccinated, right?

MARGOT

Twice plus a booster; I'm not an idiot!

RUFUS

You can still get the latest variant. Have you been wearing a mask?

MARGOT

Of course!

RUFUS

Do you always remember to wash your hands?

MARGOT

Well, no, who does?

BERNICE

I hope you're not contagious!

(MARGOT feels her own forehead and turns to RUFUS.)

MARGOT

Hmmm, yes, I'm feverish, I can tell, but if I'm infected, at least I won't die, though the timing's terrible because I just had this urge to kiss you.

RUFUS

Oh...?

BERNICE

Margot!

MARGOT

Aren't you glad I resisted? *(pause)* Ever since your wife and my husband left us...

RUFUS

They died, Margot; they left the planet not just us.

MARGOT

The point is we're both alone.

RUFUS

For different reasons, and we're *not* alone; we have friends and family.

BERNICE

(to Margot) You have me, dear, and Dorian.

MARGOT

Dorian probably infected me; my own daughter would like to see me dead.

BERNICE

Nonsense, that's not true!

MARGOT

(leaping up) Oh, shit!!

BERNICE

What...?!

MARGOT

Something just crawled on my foot!

BERNICE

I don't see anything.

MARGOT

(pointing) Oh, Jesus! It's a rat!

(MARGOT starts to blink and and rub her eyes.)

MARGOT

Damn, it's gone! *(pointing)* It was right there. Didn't you see it?!

BERNICE

No.

RUFUS

Sorry...

MARGOT

(pointing) It headed for the kitchen. *(pause)* You really can't see...?

BERNICE

No!

RUFUS

No.

BERNICE

Maybe it's Dory's.

MARGOT

What...?

BERNICE

Dory's familiar! He must've abandoned her for you -- unless you've conjured your own.

MARGOT

No! That's insane, why would I? Familiars are optical illusions, but I...I did see or thought I saw... *(pointing)* There he is again! Go away! Scat! *(pause)* Good! He's gone!! *(pause)* You're sure you didn't see...?

RUFUS

I'm sure.

BERNICE

Sorry, dear.

RUFUS

Please, Margot, go to bed, get some rest, and tomorrow get properly tested.

MARGOT

Yes, tomorrow...

(MARGOT staggers off as BERNICE turns to RUFUS.)

BERNICE

I swear I didn't see a thing.

RUFUS

Neither did I.

BERNICE

What's going on? Could all these visions be caused by some mutant variant..?

RUFUS

Possibly, the effects of this virus are unpredictable.

BERNICE

Poor Margot. How depressing to think that even if we're vaccinated, masking, and avoiding crowds, we can still become infected. *(she sighs)* More wine?

RUFUS

No thanks.

BERNICE

If you'd like you can stay the night. There's a spare room with its own bath.

RUFUS

No, thanks, I really should get going.

BERNICE

Please stay a bit longer. *(pause)* I'm sure you're aware that Margot's always had a crush on you, even after you married Arla and she married Christopher. *(she sighs)* I'm glad you managed to stay friends.

RUFUS

It helped that you were part of the bargain.

BERNICE

Thanks. *(pause)* Do you think it's possible that Margot's rat was Dory's?

RUFUS

I doubt it. Dorian's rat was her own persistent delusion and didn't appear to exist outside her own perception.

BERNICE

Then is it just a coincidence that Margot's acquired a similar rat? Of course, you don't even believe it exists.

RUFUS

True, but I believe that she believes it.

BERNICE

Can delusions be contagious? And what if Dorian's rat really is a familiar but living in a dimension that only infected people have access to?

RUFUS

Well, that's a theory I wish I were open minded enough to consider, but I'm not.

BERNICE

(she sighs) Do you suppose victims of the bubonic plague had aftereffects like this?

RUFUS

Possibly, but that plague was worse and the symptoms obvious -- oozing buboes followed by a swift death. There was little sanitation, and we've made quantum leaps since then.

BERNICE

(she sighs) At least Dorian has a job to look forward to. What did you think of Godfrey?

RUFUS

I liked him, though I can't claim to know him.

BERNICE

(she sighs) Isn't it interesting how Dory and her mother are nothing alike. Dory seems capable of empathy in a way Margot isn't, and it's my fault.

RUFUS

Why is it your fault?

BERNICE

Because in order to feel empathy you have to be shown empathy as a child, and I never showed Margot enough. Her father was my world and when I wasn't with him I was working and too exhausted to even kiss her good night. When Gordon died she was twelve, and I tried to compensate, but it was too little too late.

RUFUS

There's only so much parents can do to influence a child's character, but Margot's amazing: a renown scientist and lecturer. You should be proud.

BERNICE

Oh, believe me, I am. Of course, I'm forbidden to show it. Margot always been suspicious of praise and prizes, afraid they'll go to her head and she'll rest on her laurels. Instead they cost her a husband who couldn't stand the competition.

RUFUS

Really? I always liked Christopher.

BERNICE

Yes, everyone liked him, but did you ever hear him say a kind word about Margot's triumphs and awards? There was never a sense of celebration in that house. Christopher wanted Margot to be the kind of woman who hides under a rock, and did you notice how he always had his hand on her elbow or her ass like she was his property? *(pause, she sighs)* I confess I wasn't sorry when he died. In fact, I felt responsible since I'm the one who killed him. *(she sighs)* Now he's nothing but ash in an alabaster urn.

RUFUS

What do you mean you killed him?

BERNICE

You knew he was an alcoholic...?

RUFUS

No, I noticed he drank, but he always seemed functional.

BERNICE

I let him drive home when I knew he was drunk; that's when he crashed.

RUFUS

As I recall he was hit by a van full of kids high on meth.

BERNICE

Yes, but if he'd been sober, he'd have seen them coming.

RUFUS

(pause) So you've been living with this guilt all these years?

BERNICE

Not really. Christopher was Margot's biggest mistake. She was never cut out to be a wife much less a mother, though she's well informed. I mean, she knows things, not just practical things like how to get stains out of trousers, but she reads history and can name countries, capitals, presidents, poets, trees, birds, and insects -- not to mention cook a gourmet meal, and furnish an elegant home. Of course, being beautiful she's always been admired; her flaw is that she doesn't invite affection the way mothers should.

RUFUS

I'm sure Dorian loves her anyway; children can't help but love their parents. They're at their mercy, it's all they know.

BERNICE

But she's grown up now, so how do we save her from a padded cell in Bellevue? (*she sighs*) Of course now Margot needs saving as well.

RUFUS

People today aren't easily confined; they tend to get outpatient therapy and appropriate prescriptions.

BERNICE

What about shock treatments?

RUFUS

If you mean electro-convulsive therapy, that's only for patients who cease to function or endanger others, and neither Dorian nor Margot appear to be candidates.

BERNICE

Of course you don't believe their familiar even exists, but how do you explain that trick he does -- you know, changing the temperature.

RUFUS

Just because I don't have an explanation doesn't mean there isn't one.

(DORIAN and GODFREY enter.)

BERNICE

Dorian! What are you doing home already?

DORIAN

Godfrey just informed me that he's been sleeping in the bookstore. His father tested positive and didn't want to risk him getting infected, so I wondered if he could stay here?

BERNICE

That's fine with me, dear, but you'll have to consult your mother. *(to Godfrey)* I assume you've been fully vaccinated?

GODFREY

Yes.

RUFUS

I'm sorry about your father. Is he very ill?

GODFREY

He's in bed with a fever.

BERNICE

Shouldn't you be quarantined...?

DORIAN

Godfrey's fine! His father just returned from a trip so they haven't been around each other. I told him he could use the spare room upstairs.

(MARGOT enters in her pajamas and robe.)

MARGOT

Well, Dorian, I hope you're happy! Your little friend's started following me!

DORIAN

What...?

MARGOT

You heard me.

DORIAN

Oh, god, I...I'm sorry, but where...? Where is he?

MARGOT

(pointing) There! And I want him gone, so take him back!

DORIAN

I can't control him; I can't even see him. *(pause)* At least you finally believe me.

MARGOT

Oh, yes, yes, I believe you, but now what?! There must be a way to get rid of these things -- exorcists, exterminators. How did you get rid of him?!

DORIAN

I didn't; he left on his own, so he obviously preferred following you.

MARGOT

(noticing Godfrey) What's he doing here?!

DORIAN

I just explained to Gran that his family's infected but Godfrey's not. We came back to see if it's all right for him to stay the night.

MARGOT

Absolutely not! If he's had any contact with his family, he's a potential spreader and needs to be quarantined, *(to Godfrey)* so I want you gone! Now!

GODFREY

Fine, I'm leaving. Good night, Dorian.

(GODFREY starts to leave.)

DORIAN

Wait!

(DORIAN confronts GODFREY, pulling him close, then kisses him on the lips. MARGOT and BERNICE stare agape while GODFREY appears stunned, then smiles.)

DORIAN

I'll see you tomorrow.

MARGOT

Oh, no, you won't!

(GODFREY waves and swiftly departs as DORIAN turns to her mother.)

DORIAN

God, you're so rude!

MARGOT

And you're so reckless! Kissing a man who may be infected which means you could be infected and contaminate us all!

DORIAN

But we've all been vaccinated, so we won't die.

MARGOT

You're getting tested tomorrow!

DORIAN

Fine if it'll make you feel better.

MARGOT

Nothing will make me feel better!

RUFUS

Margot, I think you're overreacting.

MARGOT

Oh, shush! *(to Dorian)* Now sit down! We need to talk about your faithless familiar. I have a plan: As I understand it, he didn't appear until you visited my lab which means it's likely that he was somehow generated from one of my rats, right?

DORIAN

Maybe...

MARGOT

That's why I'm going to euthanize the lot.

DORIAN

What...? You're going to slaughter...

MARGOT

Yes!

DORIAN

All of them...?

MARGOT

There's plenty more to replace them, believe me.

RUFUS

Look why don't we all sit down and discuss this amicably...

MARGOT

Oh, shush! You've no idea what it's like! I'm sure you think we're delusional, that you're the only sane one among us!

RUFUS

No, I'm just bewildered because this isn't like you.

BERNICE

I agree! Margot, dear, do you think what you and Dorian are seeing could be the result of ingesting some hallucinogenic chemicals?

MARGOT

No! Absolutely not! You know we don't take drugs!

BERNICE

Yes, you do. *(to Rufus)* She takes prescription strength sleeping pills.

MARGOT

Oh, shush!

BERNICE

And washes them down with wine.

MARGOT

That's nobody's damn business! *(to Rufus)* These are stressful times, and if you spent your days with restless rats, then dealing with mother and Dorian, you'd understand.

BERNICE

I'm sorry we're such a burden, dear.

DORIAN

Yeah.

RUFUS

What can I do to help?

MARGOT

Nothing!

DORIAN

But he does help; he listens to us.

MARGOT

But he judges us. *(to Rufus)* You do! I can tell by those deep breaths you take as if we're trying your holier-than-thou patience.

RUFUS

I'm sorry you think...

MARGOT

Oh, for chrissake, stop saying you're sorry! I know how people in your profession think: you flatter yourselves that you're the enlightened elite, railing against the huddled masses of misguided fools!

RUFUS

There's some truth to that, but I confess I envy you and Dorian -- your openness to this experience.

MARGOT

We can't help but be open! We didn't ask for this! If I were going to conjure a familiar, it certainly wouldn't be a rat; I'd much prefer a beagle or a tabby cat.

DORIAN

I don't mind Rufus being a rat -- at least he's small.

(MARGOT glances around.)

MARGOT

So small he seems to have vanished.

DORIAN

Again?! When...?

MARGOT

Just now.

DORIAN

You really don't see...?

MARGOT

No!

DORIAN

Well, neither do I.

BERNICE

Don't look at me!

RUFUS

So what are the rules here? Only the person who has the familiar can actually see it...?

MARGOT

Obviously, but we can't control it.

RUFUS

So the familiar does the choosing?

DORIAN

Right.

MARGOT

Yes.

BERNICE

Well, I'm glad he didn't choose me.

MARGOT

Ha! You could be next!

DORIAN

I liked having a familiar, to finally have someone that listened, that made me feel chosen -- special.

MARGOT

Rufus isn't a *someone*; he's a rodent, a rat that isn't even alive. In fact, he isn't even a rat. *(to Bernice)* If your research is correct, then we have to consider that he might be something else altogether, something contradicted by physics, biology -- the whole nature of reality.

BERNICE

But not theology, not the nature of the divine.

MARGOT

That's an interesting observation from someone who claims to be an atheist.

BERNICE

That doesn't mean I don't believe in the divine; I just don't believe in god. *(to Rufus)* Do you?

RUFUS

No, though I'd welcome proof of whatever exists beyond my perceptions, some hope for the possibility of transcendence, though I can't help but wonder what's the purpose of familiars? And why do they only present themselves to certain people?

DORIAN

You mean to women?

MARGOT

He means to impressionable fools.

RUFUS

No, I mean to people who've suffered the neuropsychiatric aftereffects of an inscrutable virus.

DORIAN

Well, he was real to me; he even became a comfort. Look, all I know is that when I was depressed he appeared, and when I felt better, he left.

BERNICE

You mean after you met Godfrey...?

DORIAN

No, after knowing there was someplace that wanted me and my paintings, so maybe familiars just go where they're needed.

MARGOT

Well, I don't need him! I have my projects, my reputation; I have family and friends (*to Rufus*) like you.

BERNICE

You know I always thought you two would become more than friends, but given his calling, I'm sure he knows it's not easy living with a genius.

MARGOT

You've had too much to drink, and I never claimed to be a genius!

BERNICE

But you are and it's like living with a Queen -- everything sacrificed for her majesty's work.

MARGOT

Oh, bullshit!

BERNICE

(*to Rufus*) It's true! When things aren't going well, there's sulking silence, meals delayed, snappish little quarrels about nothing.

MARGOT

Oh, shush!

BERNICE

Ahhh, but when she has a breakthrough, then out comes the champagne -- the caviar and eclairs!

MARGOT

That may be true, but you've never understood because you don't know what it's like.

BERNICE

Oh, yes I do!

MARGOT

Let me finish! *(pause)* The truth is there's nothing more exciting than being the first to discover the secret clue to a formula that could change the world. *(touching her breast)* Your heart pounds, your pulse races, you forget how to breathe because you want to stop time, to hold on to the exact second the miraculous solution appears. Of course the downside is finding out someone else is on to the same formula and beats you to the finish line, but for those brief moments it's absolutely thrilling.

(Pause as MARGOT sighs.)

BEATRICE

Trust me, we've all had our own own thrilling moments, and for me it was giving birth to you, Margot dear.

MARGOT

Really...?

DORIAN

(to Margot) Was giving birth to me thrilling?

MARGOT

No, it was terrifying, but a relief when I saw ten fingers, ten toes, and no horns growing out of your head.

DORIAN

Ha! You just can't see them!

BERNICE

(to Dorian) Just be grateful you weren't born as competitive as your mother.

MARGOT

There's nothing wrong with being ambitious, for wanting the world to be better because you were born.

BERNICE

For most of us, having a happy family is enough.

MARGOT

Not for me! I've always wanted more, something for me and me alone, though some days I feel I'm running a race to a finish line that keeps moving. Believe it or not, my team and I thought we'd discovered a cure for dementia, but it turned out the formula only worked on rats.

DORIAN

But you're closer...?

MARGOT

Maybe. The smart rats were great at navigating a maze; the dumb ones got stuck, but when we injected our formula, their navigational skills improved. Later, when we tried it on human volunteers, nothing changed. Of course instead of a maze; we gave them cognitive tests.

BERNICE

So you should be glad Dorian's an artist. What she does makes her happy and she'll leave the world with wondrous works of art.

DORIAN

And mother will leave leave cures and vaccines that will save humanity from the coming plagues.

MARGOT

Maybe, but let's face it: most of what any of us accomplish is destined for the slag heap of history.

BERNICE

Not for artists! The right painting at the right time seen by the right pair of eyes can delight us forever. Don't you agree, Rufus?

RUFUS

Yes, and speaking of paintings, when you finish your rat, may I take a photograph?

DORIAN

Sure.

RUFUS

I was also wondering if you'd give me permission to bring the story of your familiar to the attention of my colleagues? At our next meeting we're focusing on the neuro-psychological effects of Covid, so your experience would be of interest.

MARGOT

My daughter is not a guinea pig!

DORIAN

Oh, I don't mind.

MARGOT

Fine, but keep me out of it -- not that I was asked.

RUFUS

Because I knew you'd say no. *(to Dorian)* Let me know when you finish the painting.

DORIAN

When do you need it?

RUFUS

In two weeks, and if you don't mind, I'd like to email a copy to each of the participants.

DORIAN

Sure.

BERNICE

Just think, Dorian, you'll be the star attraction, your painting proof of your ordeal.

RUFUS

That's true. Several of my patients suffered hallucinations, but you're the only one with the talent to show us what you've seen.

MARGOT

Your colleagues will envy her. Even I envy her -- not her talent so much as her youth, her having more time.

BERNICE

You shouldn't envy your own child, Margot; it's very unbecoming.

MARGOT

I can't help what I feel.

BERNICE

Your problem is you've always underestimated Dorian. You assumed her life would be lacking, but now she has a future and a beau.

DORIAN

A beau...?

BERNICE

Godfrey! He's obviously smitten.

DORIAN

Oh, no, I...I don't think so.

BERNICE

Well, if he isn't he should be. Just be careful; you can't let the first man you meet into your heart -- unless you're sure he's a good person.

DORIAN

I haven't let him into my heart, and he's not the first man I've met!

BERNICE

At least he admires your talent and that's a start. As your mother knows, finding a man who wishes you well isn't easy.

DORIAN

(pause) You mean dad didn't...?

MARGOT

Oh, God no! My success was his torment. It made him feel left out, excluded from the club, even though his speciality then was STDs. He actually aspired to writing a definitive textbook featuring all the great pandemics -- from Cholera to Covid.

DORIAN

But he didn't...?

MARGOT

I'm afraid not. *(pause)* Writing takes incredible discipline and hard work, but he had a very successful teaching career and students who still think he's god.

DORIAN

I always wondered why you left him.

MARGOT

Oh, my dear, I didn't leave him; he left me. You mean all these years you thought...?

DORIAN

You told me you left.

MARGOT

Did I...? Well what difference does it make? Truth be told, I suppose we left each other, but weren't we talking about you? Your job is a new beginning and my advice is to start making an effort. No offense, dear, but you look like one of the overfed undernourished girls I work with in the lab. What do you think, Rufus?

RUFUS

I think Dorian's just fine as she is, and you should leave her in peace.

DORIAN

Thanks!

MARGOT

I beg your pardon?!

RUFUS

Forgive me for being candid, but lately I sense an unfortunate animosity between you that I don't understand.

MARGOT

But which is totally normal for mothers and daughters.

DORIAN

And which is why I'm leaving.

MARGOT

What...?

DORIAN

I'm going to move to an apartment with another girl.

MARGOT

Since when did this come about, and who's this girl?

DORIAN

We haven't met. I saw a message on an internet bulletin board and noticed she lives close to the bookstore. I've texted her and she said I'd have my own bedroom and we'd share the kitchen and living room. I'm going to check it out tomorrow.

MARGOT

Well, I...I'm surprised. I thought you were happy here.

DORIAN

I am, but I'm afraid if I don't leave now I never will. I'll risk becoming too dependent and...stunted.

MARGOT

Stunted!?

BERNICE

(to Margot) She's afraid of becoming a spinster.

MARGOT

I'm sorry you feel that way *(to Bernice)* and women aren't called spinsters anymore! They're encouraged to be independent! Tell me more about this girl you're going to live with.

DORIAN

Her name is Cressida Cosgrove, and she's a graduate student at NYU.

BERNICE

Are you going to tell her about your little familiar?

DORIAN

Not unless he comes back, *(to Margot)* and he's not my familiar any more, is he?

MARGOT

No, but he's not mine either!

BERNICE

"Now he's gone we know not where."

MARGOT

Watch out, you might be next!

BERNICE

Bite your tongue!

MARGOT

(to Dorian) I confess I don't like the idea of your moving away.

BERNICE

You're just afraid we'll never see her again.

DORIAN

Of course you will! I'll call or text every day and visit on weekends.

BERNICE

Or take the opportunity to cancel us altogether.

DORIAN

No, never! I'd never cancel you!

BERNICE

You'll break your mother's heart like she broke mine. She abandoned me for years.
(*to Rufus*) It's the great generational divide, isn't?

RUFUS

It doesn't have to be; you could all learn to adjust.

BERNICE

Just don't forget us, dear.

DORIAN

Of course not! It's just that I need more privacy, more freedom.

MARGOT

What irony! You used to complain about feeling invisible, and now here you are, making yourself disappear.

DORIAN

No, I'm not! Tell them, Rufus! Tell them it's okay for a grown daughter to leave home.

MARGOT

Oh, keep him out of it. What does he know? He's never had children!

DORIAN

But he has! He's had me! He's been like a father. In fact, I secretly wished you'd married him. (*pause*) Sorry, I shouldn't have said that.

BERNICE

That's all right, dear. I wished it too.

RUFUS

So did I.

MARGOT

Really? You wanted a rat-catcher like me?

RUFUS

Yes.

MARGOT

Why didn't you say so?

RUFUS

Christopher beat me to it.

MARGOT

Oh, I...I didn't know.

RUFUS

I didn't let you.

(Pause until DORIAN'S phone beeps!)

BERNICE

Answer that.

(DORIAN un-pockets her phone and reads her message.)

DORIAN

I...I'm sorry, but I should go.

MARGOT

It's awfully late isn't it?

DORIAN

I promised to meet Godfrey. The bookstore closes at ten, so we couldn't meet earlier.

(DORIAN puts on her jacket.)

BERNICE

Good night, dear.

RUFUS

Good night, Dorian.

(DORIAN waves and departs.)

BERNICE

Now I think I'll turn in. Good night.

RUFUS

Good night, Bernice.

MARGOT

Good night.

(BERNICE departs as MARGOT turns to RUFUS,
grasping his hand.)

MARGOT

Can I persuade you to stay?

RUFUS

You're serious...?

MARGOT

Oh, yes.

RUFUS

After all this time...?

MARGOT

Let's not waste another minute.

(MARGOT embraces RUFUS, kissing him as lights dim
to black.)

SCENE 5

(The next morning MARGOT is in her bathrobe, pacing,
holding a coffee mug. BERNICE enters, also wearing
a robe.)

MARGOT

She didn't come home last night.

BERNICE

Dorian...?

MARGOT

Who else?! She could've had the decency to call instead of texting!

BERNICE

You'll have to face the fact that soon she'll be leaving us.

MARGOT

I know. *(pause)* I confess when she tested positive I wasn't sorry -- of course, I didn't expect her to nearly die. Instead I saw her illness as an excuse to keep her quarantined and close to home. Does that make me selfish? Unmotherly...?

BERNICE

No, just possessive.

RUFUS

Just human.

(RUFUS has entered having overheard. His shirt is untucked since he has obviously spent the night.)

MARGOT

Oh, Rufus, I can't bear to think of this place without Dorian in it. These rooms already seem haunted by her absence. *(pause)* Who knew I'd feel like every other woman who's invested too much in her child?

BERNICE

(to Rufus) Apparently she spent the night with Godfrey, but I did some investigating.

MARGOT

You what?!

BERNICE

According to his profile, he's a Cornell graduate with a Masters Degree in English Literature. Digging further, I found out he was engaged to a woman named Emma Roberts who's posted pictures of them together. Of course, that was the past; maybe Dorian's the future, the right one.

MARGOT

If he breaks her heart, I'll kill him.

BERNICE

Margot!

MARGOT

I don't trust him.

RUFUS

Why not? You don't really know him.

MARGOT

He said he saw Dorian's familiar, then admitted he only saw a shadow but I'm sure he was lying.

BERNICE

So what if he was? Then he was probably flirting, just trying to please her.

MARGOT

It shows a flaw in his character and he gives off a scent.

BERNICE

What...?!

MARGOT

He smells like a man with secrets.

RUFUS

Ha! So what does that smell like?

MARGOT

Cheap cologne with a whiff of cannabis.

RUFUS

Ha, ha!

BERNICE

What nonsense,....

BERNICE

...I didn't smell it!

RUFUS

Neither did I.

BERNICE

Your problem is you don't think anyone's worthy of Dorian. *(to Rufus)* What did you think?

RUFUS

I liked him.

MARGOT

But is he right for Dorian?

RUFUS

She said they were just getting to know each other, but you should trust her judgment.

MARGOT

Oh, what do you know?!

RUFUS

Well, I know Dorian; I know that she's talented, generous, and the story of her familiar is one I'm eager to share.

MARGOT

Share or steal?

RUFUS

"Share" since she doesn't seem to mind.

MARGOT

What about me!? It's my story too and I might mind! And since we're being so honest, I'll tell you a secret: her rat paintings embarrass me. I feel my profession's being exposed and demeaned. People will think what I do is disgusting and that Dorian's trying to see something redemptive in my poor little victimized rats. I'll become an object of ridicule while she's being proclaimed a first rate original deserving of enough acclaim to raise the price of her paintings so she won't have to work in a bookstore! Well guess what? I'm thinking of liberating them!

BERNICE

What...?

RUFUS

Liberating your rats?

MARGOT

That's right! I'm going to open their cages and let them scamper out into the world!

RUFUS

How many rats are we talking about?

MARGOT

Over six hundred and counting -- enough for the city's exterminators to take notice and possibly cause a panic.

BERNICE

You know you don't mean that, dear.

(RUFUS leaps up!)

RUFUS

Oh, god! One just ran over my foot!

BERNICE

Where? I don't see him.

DORIAN

Neither do I.

RUFUS

He just took off! (*pointing*) Over there!

MARGOT

Ha, ha! It's your turn, Rufus.

RUFUS

What?!

MARGOT

Behold our familiar, ha, ha!

RUFUS

Oh, Jesus, he's coming back! You really don't see...?

MARGOT

No!

BERNICE

Sorry.

(Pause as RUFUS stares, following the phantom rat with his eyes as DORIAN enters.)

DORIAN

Hi.

BERNICE

Hello, dear.

DORIAN

(*pause*) What's wrong? Why are you all looking weird.

BERNICE

Your little familiar has started following Rufus.

DORIAN

Oh, wow. *(to Rufus)* So you see him...? You finally believe me?

RUFUS

How long does he stick around?

DORIAN

It varies. With me he stayed a week; with mother only a few days.

MARGOT

Three to be exact.

RUFUS

But I thought you had to have the virus in order to attract him.

MARGOT

So maybe you're like me. You've probably had it but without symptoms.

RUFUS

It's possible, and I...I did have a dry cough, but tested negative. Of course, then the tests weren't always reliable, but what now? I...I have to function, to deal with patients.

DORIAN

He won't stop you; he just follows behind.

RUFUS

Everywhere...?

DORIAN

Yes! Rufus, meet Rufus!

MARGOT

You might consider giving him another name.

BERNICE

I suppose we should be grateful he isn't a she. Imagine hundreds of little pup familiars following hundreds of humans.

MARGOT

Oh, stop babbling nonsense! Rufus is obviously upset!

RUFUS

Oh, god, I...I'm supposed to give a speech. Will he follow me to the podium?

MARGOT
Probably.

DORIAN
Yes.

RUFUS
It's too late to cancel...

MARGOT
Then don't! I'll come with you; I'll sit in front so you can focus on me.

DORIAN
I'll come too.

BERNICE
So will I!

RUFUS
Really? All three of you...?

MARGOT
Yes.

DORIAN
Sure.

BERNICE
Of course.

(MARGOT smiles, grasping RUFUS's hand as lights dim.)

EPILOGUE

(A spot light shines on RUFUS who stands alone addressing the audience.)

RUFUS
Ladies, Gentlemen, and Esteemed Colleagues: first I must apologize to my patients in attendance if I ever doubted your claims of being stalked by demons. In the immortal words of Hippocrates, *cura te ipsum*, physician heal thyself. I say this because I was stalked by a demon of my own disguised as a rodent. Since he's fickle, I suspect that one of you may attract his interest and he'll leave me in peace. If that happens try not to be afraid or repulsed. Just soldier on with your usual activities and accept him as you would your own shadow. Ahhhh! I knew it! There he goes, skittering off the stage, headed straight (*pointing*) for you!! Ha, ha!

(Skittering sounds are heard as RUFUS smiles and lights fade to black.)

The End



