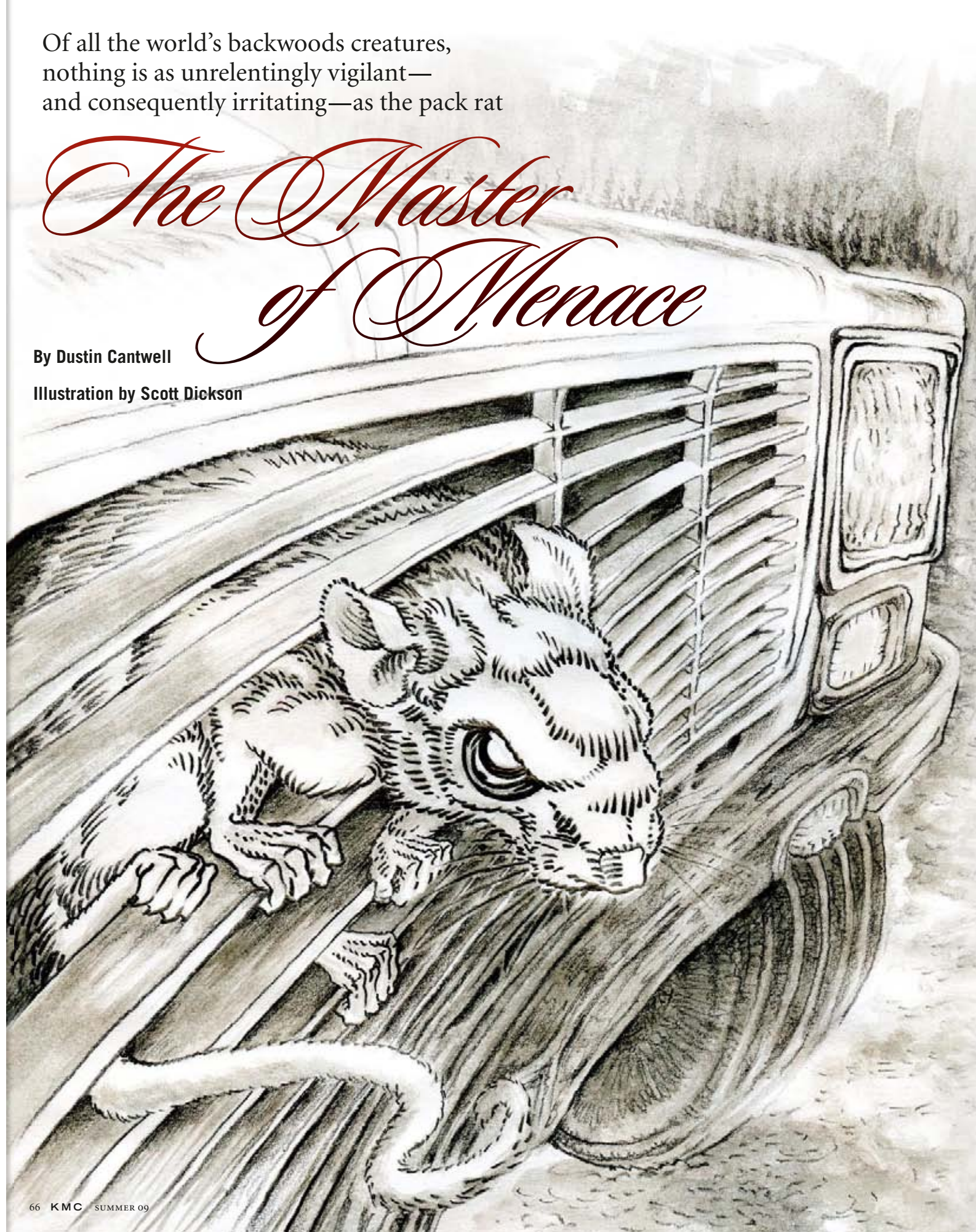


Of all the world's backwoods creatures, nothing is as unrelentingly vigilant—and consequently irritating—as the pack rat

The Master of Menace

By Dustin Cantwell

Illustration by Scott Dickson



burly? yes no



burly? yes no



burly? yes no



burly? yes no



burly? yes no



burly? yes no

SURE, YOU CAN CALL YOUR Uncle Bud a “pack rat,” because he owns 124 coffee mugs and 20 toasters and hub-caps too numerous to count. Pack rat may seem a comical, even endearing tag for ol’ Bud. Literally, though, for those who’ve had the misfortune of being invaded by one, the pack rat, or genus *Neotoma*, is far from funny. It is gnawing destruction. It is psychological damage. It is resident evil.

The deranged cousin of mice, the bipolar relative of weasels and the madcap of martens, the pack rat is simply the most maniacal rodent ever to exist. He is not Bud, your coffee cup-loving uncle. He is part chain-saw, part GPS system, part master thief, part hypnotist, part banker and capable of destroying your home in a single chew.

The pack rat experience begins innocently with small black droppings left on an intimate possession, like your pillow. It quickly progresses from there: items on bookshelves are overturned onto the floor, altarpieces are stolen and food goes missing. Know that a pack rat can gnaw through anything if it’s hungry.

Then it happens, the first moment you meet a pack rat eye to eye. Unlike other rodents, a pack rat has no fear of you—you being a much lesser being in all facets of collection and general hoarding. If you chase it off with a broom, it will magically reappear somewhere else in the room, little black, beady eyes cutting into your soul. The psychological damage begins with endless scratching, chewing, scuffling, tinkering and bold home renovations. Night after night it ransacks, chewing plants, gnawing new passageways, stealing and hiding food, and leaving black shit-tacs on your pillow.

Years ago, living in Retallack, just west of Kaslo, British Columbia, in the old Hudson’s Bay Store, I had a cabin infested with pack rats, causing an unfolding of events that pitted man against reckless rodent.

ONE DAY AFTER WORK, I devise a live pack rat trap using some old cedar shingles. To my surprise, I catch one, which I lured in with peanut butter and a pinch of tinfoil for garnish. Believe it or not, they have a fetish for shiny objects.

Catching the pack rat is joyous, but it doesn’t last for long. Before work the next day, I drive the satanic beast 30 kilometres down the road, and in a ditch I gently slide the door of the trap open. At first nothing happens. Then suddenly the pack rat bolts out, but instead of heading for the woods, it runs under my Chevy Blazer and hops into the truck’s undercarriage. Anger fills me. I get into the truck and speed off. I take

jumps, hit puddles and swerve dangerously, knowing it can’t stay under there.

I start work that morning with the accomplishment of vanquishing a foe. Pounding nails up in Schroeder Creek, looking out at the beautiful Kootenay scenery, my gaze comes to the Blazer. There in the front grille is the undeniable face of the pack rat. I leap from the roof, run to the vehicle and lift the hood. The pack rat has torn out all of the engine’s insulation and begun making a nest on my carburetor. Other pieces of my electrical system are woven into the mass of fiberglass. My temperature soars, my hands shake and my mind reels—then a plan comes to mind.

I tear out of the job site. My next destination: Kaslo Car Wash. I screech into the open bay doors and quickly shut them. I open up the hood of the truck just in time to see the vermin escape down a side panel.

I pull the jet sprayer out of the holster and fire off a few sprays into the air. I am crazed. I spray every square inch of the truck: underneath the body, in the side panels and in the engine, until my time runs out. Standing in the car wash, half drenched with fury—and still no pack rat. I dig out my last quarter. This is it.

I circle the vehicle the way a cat does when it finds a mouse; I will prevent its escape. Then I see it fall, a wet thud underneath the truck. The once-furry rat is now waterlogged, having fallen down a few notches on the rodent tree to resemble an emaciated squirrel.

I open a bay door of the car wash a foot or so. Sensing an escape, the pack rat runs for the door. As one last token of victory, I give a quick squeeze on the jet sprayer to help push it out. To my astonishment and inner glee, the pack rat heads straight for the Kaslo RCMP office, slinking underneath one of its doors.

The jet sprayer at my side, the bay doors flung open and the pack rat finally vanquished, I form a wary smile. The battle is won, but I know the war is far from over.

Dustin Cantwell is a pro-sponsored pack rat live trapper, local radio programmer on Kootenay Co-op Radio (Fane of the Cosmos) and co-owner of Nelson, BC’s Holy Smoke Culture Shop.

