



A Great Adventure

Rexio was a small plump lazy mouse who liked to spend a considerable amount of his time dozing beneath the old polished floorboards of a top floor tenement apartment in New York City, comfortably snuggled up in a bed of old newspapers. Above his sleepy snorey head was another of his favourite places, an elaborately constructed and well-tended shrine. Built at the beginning of the 20th century, on the Upper West Side above 169th Street, the tenement he inhabited was only ten storeys high and was within mouse walking distance of the Hudson River. The shrine was of more recent origin.

In the apartment lived a beautiful woman from Puerto Rico, Kathleen Perez, and her husband Michael. He was from the cold and rainy Pacific North West and liked the summer heat of New York City - but not the bugs. When he didn't work at the coffee shop, he was handsome and fine drummer. Whenever he played, the mouse - whether fast asleep or not - idly tapped his tail and toes to the rhythms echoing under the floorboards.

There were actually three shrines in the apartment, the largest of which - the one Rexio particularly liked - was placed in the hallway, always to be passed by when entering or leaving. Here there were old black and white photographs of family members, some yellowing and fading at the edges. This was the shrine of the *Egun* - the revered dead, the ancestors. If you wish to live in harmony with the world, it is important to respect those who have passed before. So here, alongside Great Grandfather Perez and Uncle Tupelo, was placed a large colour picture - torn from a magazine - of Bob Marley, whose gift of music had brought joy to many people. Here

too was an impression of Saint Monica, an African laywoman, who gave birth to Saint Augustine of Hippo. Here also was a picture of Pierre Toussaint, born a slave in Haiti, who came to New York and worked as a barber and with orphans, the poor and the sick. While this shrine had begun to spread out across the burnished wooden floor, with many devotional pictures of Santa Maria, it was small in comparison to the Shrine of St. James of Compostela in Santiago, where pilgrims brought back scallop shells as proof of their visit - wearing them as brooches or perhaps displaying them on their mantelpieces as a sign of their devotion.

For a shrine to have potency it was necessary for all four elements to be present; earth, fire, water, air – in this particular apartment, a clutch of bird feathers represented this last element. On one occasion, a shrine had been left unattended, without water, and soon caught fire, burning away part of the bedroom wall before Kathleen rushed in from the kitchen to douse the flames. Each shrine was variously adorned with ribbons, flowers, candles of all shapes and sizes, plastic glittery jewellery, beads and sequins, a necklace of pink coral, incense and silver spoons, cardamoms and other fine herbs and berries. Huckleberry leaves and offerings of food were placed there by Kathleen or Michael – and much enjoyed by Rexio in the depth of the night.

Mostly food was stored in blue Tupperware containers in kitchen cupboards next to the espresso machine but when Kathleen and Michael occasionally put small items of food on the shrine, in honour of their ancestors, favoured saints and minor deities, Rexio partook of these offerings in the spirit in which they had been given. Sometimes, a glass of red wine or rum was also be placed on the shrine, but the little mouse merely sniffed at this - once he had drunk a whole glass of Donq Crystal and had lay prone for two days in a trance.

When the kitchen was busy with the sounds and scents of cooking, the little mouse would creep as close as possible to enjoy this sensory treat, in anticipation of the flavourful morsels that may be left over. Here was Kathleen, joyfully organising her ingredients and laying out her utensils, peeling, slicing and soaking green plantains, measuring cups of rice, chopping red onion and cilantro, garlic and other fresh herbs, making a bean soup, pouring a dash of oil into the *caldero* on the stovetop.

He would listen attentively because sometimes she spoke to herself, or perhaps to the vegetables or perhaps even to him. He wondered if she somehow sensed him, the little mouse hidden in the corner.

‘You see,’ she said, ‘Rice and beans didn’t use to get on so well. This is understandable, since they are so different to each other. Rice, as you know, is thin and defiant. A bit sticky and dry, she likes to be her own and definitely does not like

to sauce her whiteness. But beans, well, beans are very saucy. And plump. The fatter the better! And ever so friendly – beans love company. But rice doesn't like to be on the same fork with beans. No, she did not like even being on the same plate, so they argued constantly and grew to dislike each other. But then one day...'

The very thought of *casamiento* – the marriage of rice and beans – made his stomach rumble and his mouth water.

Rexio had lived in this apartment for many years, before any shrine had been assembled, well before the days of Kathleen and Michael. He knew every nook and cranny, every space between floor and wall, pipe and joist. It was warm and spacious by mouse standards. The sound of grinding coffee beans never woke the mouse, who slept contentedly through the mornings. The two people didn't bother him too much, except when they played flamenco music very loudly. Kathleen had recently taken flamenco classes and brought home bags of cds and tapes of this music. The mouse, however, liked to see her happy and she was indeed happy listening to flamenco, playing along with her castanets.

The mouse especially liked to listen to Michael play his drums. Michael had many drums and he loved to play them all, one after the other. There was the *donno* talking drum - a high pitched drum of the Ashanti; and the *dun-dun*, a talking drum of the Yoruba or the *tumbao* - a bass drum of the Congo. But his pride and joy was the *djembe* - a chalice shaped drum painted with symbols from Puerto Rico and with bright splashes of paint, the red, green and gold of Africa - a drum whose sound carried over long distances. This splendid drum had been found and given to him by Kathleen's sister, Nellie. It had slowly been renovated and sounded terrible at first, but with loving care it was brought to life again, with new rings, cord and skin. As Michael beat out a rhythm, such was the potency of this particular sound that Rexio imagined it leaving the building and spreading far across the city all the way to the ocean and merging with the sound of the Atlantic breakers.

There were, perhaps, no finer things in this whole world, the sound of the drumming and the delicious aromas of the kitchen, here and throughout the tenement.

In the apartment opposite, an old Dominican woman baked all day and all night, for her children's children, for neighbours far and wide, for many grey-haired and trusted friends. This was a woman with many admirers and devotees, as befitted her baking skills. Gorgeous smells of sweetmeats and pastries came wafting across from the open window of her kitchen into Kathleen and Michael's apartment. When they both had gone out for the day, leaving the blinds closed but the windows open an inch or two, Rexio liked to clamber up behind the iron radiator and sit on the windowsill and sniff these rich and luscious air currents wafting by.

He remembered that one year ago, by the human calendar, the old Dominican woman had baked a cake of huge proportions for Kathleen and Michael's wedding day; layer upon layer of the softest sponges, filled with guavas and cram. Her beautiful cakes were enriched with many eggs and mounds of butter and crafted with tender loving care.

‘Man, oh man! Those cakes are the best kept secret in Washington Heights,’ Michael had declared, on more than one occasion, patting his expanding belly. There were only a few tasty crumbs to be found on the shrine that night.

Little Rexio was afraid to venture into her apartment, though he knew a pathway, between creaking metal and dusty concrete lintels. You see, he believed that - in order to provide so many eggs for her baking - the old Dominican woman must keep dozens of chickens roosting there. And chickens spelled danger to the mouse, for they were pesky and inquisitive creatures with sharp beaks.

One fine day, one of those still and sticky summer days in the city, Rexio was lying comfortably on the windowsill, with the noonday sun burning down on this side of the building. The old Dominican woman, cooking from dawn, had propped open her windows with sticks and the rich scents of herb and cheese bread pleasantly filled his tiny mouse nostrils. With the warm baking smells in his nose and with the sun stroking his fur, he sprawled out and gently drifted off to sleep. He only meant to close his eyes for a moment, but he was soon in a deep slumber.

Some people believe that only humans can dream, but animals, large and small, can enter into dreamland. And, unlike humans, they retain their keen sense of smell in this place. Cats and mice have very vivid dreams - usually of each other - but Rexio's afternoon dream began by taking him to an elegant mansion house, a house surrounded by so much space and so little clutter that Rexio knew that this must be a dream of another time long past, a vision of a sylvan landscape with more trees than people, with no motor cars or trains or flying objects that were not birds.

It was a magnificent house, the house of a merchant or perhaps a successful pirate; though he noticed it was a little threadbare in places, as though hard times were afoot. The mansion was built on high ground, perched as it were on the roof of the island Manhattan. With no buildings to yet outstretch the loftiest spruce or church spire, you could see in all directions. Down on two sides lay the wide grey rivers with slow moving boats. At the southern tip of the island lay the busy seaport, bristling with tall spindly masts and smoke, the town alongside blackened and sooty in places, spreading out like the decaying contents of a burst bag of trash. Beyond the port, across the water, in between the small islands and a larger landmass, more than a hundred ships lay at anchor. To the North, vast forests swept away to infinity. Snow was beginning

to fall on the woods all around, speckling the dark greens of the land as dusk approached. Rexio crept quietly around the outside of the house, up onto the front porch and up onto a windowsill.

The interior of the mansion was ablaze with light from oil lamps, candles and well-stocked fireplaces, and filled with people finely dressed for a celebration. Men were gathered in conversation, dressed in peculiar ill-fitting blue uniforms with gold and silver trim and they wore white powdered wigs tied back with lengths of ribbon. From his vantage point, the little mouse could see a lavish feast being prepared for the guests, with turkey and goose, a whole roast pig, cranberries, hickory nuts, steaming potatoes and plates piled high with succulent vegetables. This was a banquet to make his mouth water with anticipation of what tasty morsels might be left unattended beneath the kitchen table. The window was open a crack and he crept in and found a cosy spot underneath a huge piece of furniture.

This mansion had many rooms and servants, who worked in cellars beneath the house, scurrying down corridors, from storeroom to scullery. Rexio knew instinctively this was a house that could support very many mice. Perhaps this was a memory of his ancestors, transmitted like a television picture to him? But, unlike television, he fancied that he could smell the food, the pig roasting on the spit, the scent of spiced baked apples. The hot odour of the apples tickled his nostrils and he squeezed his eyes shut and sneezed uncontrollably. Once, twice, thrice! Oh, too loudly! When he opened his eyes, he had to blink several times in rapid succession, because his view was blocked out and darkened. His eyes were all watery and he wasn't at all sure what he was seeing. Then, with an awful suddenness, an unmistakable shape came into focus close to, very close to. He found himself staring into the baleful eyes of a sleek black cat.

Rexio gulped in shock. Stupid, he told himself, a big house like this was bound to have a big cat. He sneezed again, a huge uncontrollable sneeze that snapped him out of the dream. He found himself back in Kathleen and Michael's apartment, precariously perched on the very edge of the windowsill. He jerked back, a sudden movement that proved his undoing. You see, a turtledove was resting by his side, also enjoying the wafting baking smells, dozing there in the late afternoon sun. The turtledove woke with a start, stretched and fluttered its wings and took off, the edge of one wing neatly scooping Rexio off the windowsill and far up into the air.

Flying, I'm really flying! thought the little mouse, grinning with excitement at this unexpected experience. *But mice can't fly*, said a minute voice in his head, *except in dreams of course...* Up into the air he went and, a few seconds later, began the terrifying descent to the ground below, the air whistling through his whiskers and

teeth. Then, as he began to think that he was perhaps still dreaming, there was no time for further thoughts as he crashed into a mountain of trash bags.

He awoke some time later. His body ached and his head throbbed horribly, but he was alive with no bones broken, thanks to the cushion of squishy trash. He could see the sky far above him. He looked for his window but it could not be seen. What he could see – the sky, an expanse of wall - appeared to be moving. A streetlight passed above him. It was upside down. He strained for a better view. The bags of rubbish were pressed tight around him. He found it hard to breathe. He could hear a rumbling sound, a whirr of machinery. More bags of trash began to tumble out of the sky. Fearing for his life, he chewed a hole through the plastic wall next to him and pushed himself inside the bag. He burrowed past carrot peelings, mouldy bread, cellophane, a cereal box until he found a plastic container. He knew he could just make it, his claws digging in, propelling him closer and closer... Grabbing a tea bag as a pillow, he clambered within the artificial cave. As his head cleared, he began to realise where he was – on the back of a dumpster truck which, each week, collected the refuse from the tenement blocks. But where it was now or where it was going to he could not guess.

The truck, which was now as full as it could be, was driving to the Transfer Station at the water's edge, where rubbish was taken out of the city to landfill sites and incinerators upstate. The bag that the little mouse was within soon became just one of thousands, piled into a barge that could carry 650 tons of garbage. This summer though, the city had run out of money and space. The main landfill to the south was closed, the old meadows, marshlands and wetland were piled so high with mountains of refuse that it was said they were, like the Great Wall of China, visible from outer space. To save money the City Sanitation Department had suspended the recycling of all glass and plastic; aluminium foil was still being bailed and returned to manufacturers, cans were still being melted down and made into new cans, magazines continued to be shipped off to paper mills in Canada and the Far East to make newsprint and cardboard; but everything else was simply dropped into the barge and taken away to be buried or burnt somewhere beyond the city.

After a very long time, Rexio plucked up the courage to make his escape. As he laboriously crawled up through the monumental heap of bags towards the surface, the little mouse was unaware of the specifics of this fate of rubbish or what fire pit or underground cavern he was travelling towards. Finally reaching the peak, he looked all around, sniffing the unfamiliar rank air, exhausted and feeling quite confused. He had a bad feeling in his stomach that was not hunger. The barge chugged slowly out into the river channel. The city behind was bathed in the pink and golden glow of hazy late afternoon light but the water was grey and dirty. In the distance he could see a blurry

landscape of road bridges, busy with traffic, and commuter trains running near to the water. A flock of yellow birds at the shore suddenly took to the air in a single mass, scared by a passing motorboat. Other larger birds dived from a great height headfirst into the river in search of food. The barge itself began to attract a following of birds, too many to count. One large gull, dropping like a stone, noisily landed right behind Rexio giving him a huge fright. The mouse gripped the plastic bag even tighter, fearful of being toppled once more.

The bird sniffed loudly and shook its wings. ‘How yer doing?’ it asked, pleasantly enough.

‘Hi,’ said Rexio, in little more than a whisper, his heart thumping.

‘Speak up! Speak up! No need to be shy,’ shrilled the gull. ‘I’m just passing the time of day.’

‘Where are we going?’ asked Rexio.

‘We? We? Buddy, *we* ain’t going nowhere. Me, I’m just catching my breath. You, well, that’s another story.’ The gull hopped from foot to foot, fluttering his wings as if he were impatient and had more important places to perch.

‘I meant this boat...’

‘Somewhere you don’t wanna go, little fella. Upstate would be my educated guess.’

‘Where exactly is that?’

‘Upstate! *Upstate!* Bad news for a tiny fella like you, I can tell ya that for free! For a start there’s The Great Cats of Westchester County who - if they don’t like the colour of your fur – well, big trouble, yer know whadda I mean?’

Rexio didn’t. He had heard tales of The Mole Mice, denizens of the underworld, but not of Westchester County Cats.

The gull sighed. ‘Nice day to be out on the water though, don’t ya think? Great views. Good for birdwatching.’

‘What kind of bird are you?’ asked the mouse.

‘A Laughing Gull,’ said the gull, laughing just a little at Rexio’s ignorance. ‘Don’t see so many of us about these days. See those big fellas loitering up there? Those are herring gulls. They’ll eat any old rubbish. And they have the nerve to blame us fer scavenging and stealing eggs. See, we just get stereotyped, know whadda I mean? Sure, we’re a bit noisy and pushy but, c’mon, this is the Big Apple!’

‘And,’ said the gull, ‘don’t ever mix us up with cormorants. Now, they are mean, know whadda I’m saying?’

Rexio nodded as if he did. He had led a sheltered life. He wouldn’t know a bullfinch from a redwing.

‘See, I’m not that kinda gull. I got some class and style.’

‘Yes, I can see that,’ said the mouse. ‘I expect,’ he added hopefully, ‘that a bird with such style and class would be willing to help out a fellow citizen who was a little lost?’

‘That may be true,’ said the gull. ‘But I gotta make a living too. You fellas like to spend too much time rooting around in the garbage and ya end up here. Happens all the time. I can’t tell ya the number of mice I’ve had to help out of a fix. Why, if I had a mind to, I could start up a full time rodent saving business!’

‘I’m sure you could,’ said Rexio.

‘Hey, we’re on the same wavelength here! So, what can ya give me to make it worth my while? Jewellery I like, anything shiny and pretty. Got something like that?’

Rexio thought it obvious that he had nothing about his person whatsoever and wondered if the gull was joking with him.

‘I guess,’ said the gull, ‘maybe I could get ya to rummage around in this barge. We might find something of interest. An old lost ring perhaps? I could trade something like that, no problem! Who knows what junk is in here? Old boots. Kitchen appliances. Family size burger styro-foam packaging, New Yorker magazine...’

‘Well,’ said Rexio, ‘if you can take me all the way home, there’s far better things to be found there. The people who live in the apartment decorate their shrine with all sorts of goodies.’

The gull shuffled a little closer. ‘Shrine? What *kinda* shrine?’ he inquired. ‘And what *kinda* goodies?’

‘Well, they place all sorts of coloured and scented candles there. It’s a sort of memorial. I don’t know who to.’

‘Look,’ explained the gull, ‘I’ve seen shrines to footballers and shrines to dead guitarists, flowers left at the site of a traffic accident and plain old fashioned religious shrines with plaster statues. No good to me! I need more info here! Help yerself out!’

Rexio was concentrating, trying to recall some detail that might prove attractive to this gull. ‘Well, on the shrines you’ll find herbs, pine sprigs, Christmas decorations in all shiny colours, rolls of silver thread, pieces of mosaic, coffee beans, delicious mouthfuls of food, plastic flowers...’

The gull nodded, ‘Good! Good! I like it! Gimme some more incentive.’

‘The whole apartment is full beautiful trinkets of all kinds. There’s so much I’m sure they wouldn’t miss a little. It’s a treasure trove of trinkets for a bird of taste and sophistication.’

‘A treasure trove, eh? Now yer talking,’ said the gull. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve got an address?’

‘No,’ said the mouse. ‘Sorry.’

Rexio had, in fact, rarely left the safety of his home, its familiar passageways and nooks and crannies. The interior map of this place, his tenement block, was imprinted on his consciousness but beyond that? Well, he remembered when he had crossed the road early in the morning, and explored a strip of parkland overlooking the river and sat staring at the lights of New Jersey. At that time, he had met another mouse, old and greying, who had once lived in Central Park - the biggest park in the world, the old one had said. It was nearby, a few blocks across the wild awakening city. ‘You can smell it from here,’ sniffed the ancient mouse. And it was true, you could. A faint, yet very particular aroma, borne along the air currents through the concrete canyons, above the diesel fumes and smell of fried burgers and onions.

The gull grimaced. ‘Ok, so we’re talking a visual identification only situation here, is that what we’re saying? No maps, numbers, zip codes?’

‘I guess so,’ said Rexio hesitantly. He knew his eyesight wasn’t too good, nowhere as good as his sense of smell, and he wondered how he might describe the smell of the apartment to a potentially eagle-eyed Laughing Gull.

‘Tell ya what!’ grinned the gull. ‘First we’ll head fer the Empire State building. That’s a landmark everybody knows! Popular views. Good for orientation. The Bronx is up and the Battery’s down! Know whadda I mean?’

Rexio nodded gingerly. ‘Is it far?’ he asked.

‘As far as the bird flies, my mouse,’ laughed the gull. ‘Are you ready to rock’n’roll? Ok then, time fer a bird’s eye view of the world.’ The gull lowered his head and gestured for the mouse to climb on his back. Rexio quickly clambered up. ‘Now hang on tight,’ said the gull. ‘But don’t scratch or yer’ll be swimming home!’

The Laughing Gull spread his wings wide and with one strong beat of his wings pushed off the mound of rubbish they drifted away from the barge. There was one single exhilarating moment of wind and motion as the gull and his unlikely companion swooped perilously towards the surface of the water before levelling out and rising, wings beating faster and stronger.

‘Oh boy, I so love that move!’ shouted the gull. Rexio gritted his teeth as they soared up into the sky, higher and higher, flying back towards the city.

It has to be said that Rexio kept his eyes firmly closed during the journey, so he was unable to fully appreciate the views that the gull spoke of so admiringly. The gull kept up a running commentary throughout, giving him some indication of their progress, though who knows whether or not this was a thoughtful gesture to the mouse or simply the nature of the gull to constantly chatter.

Where was he going? The naming of places meant little to him. He'd never been beyond 94th and 11th. How would he ever find his way back? It seemed they were over the water forever before they turned inland - it was all a question of catching the right currents, the gull explained.

They soared over Greenwich Village and turned north up 5th Avenue towards their destination, one of the most recognisable skyscrapers in the city. The Empire State stood at 102 storeys high, a quarter of a mile straight up into the sky. As a tourist you could take an elevator to the 80th floor, then another up to the observatory on the 86th floor with its open-air promenade.

The gull headed straight to the top, circling round twice to find an appropriate perch at the foot of the TV mast. 'Gotta watch out fer those pigeon traps,' he explained. 'So, here we are. Breathtaking, eh!'

The day had clouded over and a smog haze obscured the distance. The sun was lower in the western sky, and parts of the city were cast into shadow.

'On a good day, you know, you can see the surrounding countryside for distances of up to 80 miles,' the gull said enthusiastically. 'That's a long way for a gull, and too far for a mouse. Why, you can even see clear across Pennsylvania, Connecticut and Massachusetts!'

Rexio had never heard of these places. He began to carefully move down from the zenith of the tower. Below them, in amongst the crowds, a group of Japanese tourists were talking excitedly and shooting pictures of the Laughing Gull, who seemed happy to oblige, preening himself for the camera, moving back and forth to present his best side.

'Do you recognise anything?' called the gull. 'Nope? Thought so. Mice are so shortsighted...' He let out a snigger. 'But ya know, I understand,' he added casually. 'See, I got the same problem.'

'What! You're telling me you're short-sighted!' spluttered Rexio. 'How did we get here then? It's like the blind leading the blind.'

'Oh, instinct,' said the gull. 'Good sense of navigation. Sense of adventure. Brilliant memory. Plus a little *pizzaz!*'

'Thanks,' said Rexio.

'You're welcome,' said the gull.

Rexio sniffed the air, seeking some familiar scent. He peered out over the city, which was vaster than he had ever imagined. Even the cloud cover couldn't eclipse the entire city. It stretched in all directions, interrupted only by thin lines of water, the Hudson and East rivers, both spanned by huge bridges busy with traffic. Endless lines of yellow cabs snaked below. To the north, hemmed in amongst the skyscrapers, he

could make out a slab of green. There was something there, an elusive fragrance that he almost recognised. He leaned out further and further, sniffing hard. A burst of sunlight suddenly glinted off the metal trimmings of the tower. He suddenly lost his grip and found himself slithering down the limestone and granite surface towards the observation platform.

The gull swooped down and caught him painfully with his talons. 'Hey, where'd ya think yer going?' He landed on one of the Pay-per-View binoculars and posed for more photographs for the Japanese tourists. He winked at Rexio, 'Hey, I'm gonna be famous!'

'Great,' huffed the mouse, struggling free from the gull's grip and dropping to the floor. He scurried for the nearest cover, an open doorway.

'Hey, come back here!' shouted the gull, a little perturbed now. 'Hey, what about our deal?' The Japanese tourists were blocking his view, hemming him in with their digital SLRs and camcorders.

'Sue me!' shouted Rexio over his shoulder, speeding into the interior of the building.

The gull called out, 'C'mon back! Yer breaking my heart! I gotta make a living!'

Rexio continued to thread his way between the hundreds of pairs of feet. The crowd here was shoulder to shoulder, jostling back and forth. Fortunately, few of them thought to look down at the floor. Rexio deftly made his way into the elevator.

Arriving at ground level he was sorely tempted to seek out some scraps from the restaurants or ice-cream parlours or coffee stops, but he focused on finding a way to exit the building. Outside the noise of the street was tremendous, a cacophony that hurt his ears, so that he became desperate to escape this place. He ran out under the rear wheels of a stopped cab and tried to climb up into the darkness of the exhaust pipe but the fumes and the heat drove him back. He ran towards the cab behind and scrambled up onto the bumper of the vehicle, grasping hold of a small Stars and Stripes pennant glued to the metal. With his arms and legs and tail wrapped around the base of the flag, giving him a precarious hold, he braced himself for the next ordeal. The cab began to move uptown, but progress in the Friday night rush hour traffic was so slow that Rexio began to relax a little and enjoy the ride and the unfathomable new odours that wafted by his nose.

After a very long time, the cab came out onto Columbus Circle and stopped, by an entrance to Central Park, to pick up another passenger. Here it was that Rexio dropped down onto the tarmac and headed for the welcome cover of the bushes and trees. Once there, he began to forage for some food to take away his growing hunger,

which was not difficult. On the fringes of the park were numerous food stands selling hotdogs, popcorn, pretzels, potato chips, peanuts and roasted chestnuts.

With his belly happily full again, he rested awhile and began to wonder what would happen next to him. The natural light of the day had faded away to be replaced by a new radiance. He felt an urgent need to get away from both the incessant traffic and the multitude of people on the sidewalks; turning his back on the tall buildings ablaze with brilliant and glittering electricity, he headed into the park. Nearby, he could hear the sounds of the zoo. He decided that it was best not to go that way. Though feeling very weary, he pressed on into the unknown depths of the park, beyond the carousel and the children's swings. Finally, he crossed a long bridge that spanned quiet and unmoving water.

On the other side of the bridge and lake, the trees were clumped more closely together and the park seemed more secluded and wilder. He moved cautiously through the longer grasses. Little glowing orbs of light lit the meandering human pathways, though as he went on he could hear fewer and fewer distinct voices. The sounds began to merge into the background hum of the city, punctuated by the occasional sharp blast of a car horn. Darkness had settled all around.

He began to be aware of something moving to one side of him. If he quickened his pace, it did so too. If he slowed, it slowed down too. Something was tracking him. He began to wonder if Westchester Cats had come to live in the city and their owner let them out into the park after dusk to prowl and prey on smaller creatures. He swung his head nervously from side to side, imagining that at any moment he would see huge ravening jaws looming out of the darkness. He would simply die of fright, he thought horribly. His heart was beating unbearably fast, hurting his chest. His whole body ached as he summoned up an extra burst of speed to propel him forward into the hollow of a huge tree. He could sense a mouse hole here, amongst the roots, old and unused, its walls clogged with leaves and loose soil. He lunged desperately into it, tumbling all the way down to the bottom of the tunnel - which was considerable way. He lay there panting and utterly exhausted, not caring a jot for its poor condition. He soon fell into a dreamless sleep.

Rexio yawned the biggest yawn possible and opened his eyes to see a faint trickle of daylight at the top of the tunnel. His body was sore and throbbing and he was again feeling pangs of hunger. He thought over the events of the day before and concluded that he was a very lucky mouse indeed. But would his luck continue to hold? There was only one way to find out, to climb out of this old mouse hole and continue with his great adventure, which is how he was beginning to think of this.

The morning was bright and humid. There was barely a cloud in the sky, the hard light giving an oily sheen to the very air. Beyond the woodland thicket, he could see and hear children playing softball, people with coloured discs they threw into the air and attempted to catch, people running and cycling, walking, people sitting on the grass or on benches, sunbathing. In the distance an odd building stood atop a rocky outcrop, a stone medieval styled castle. It contained a Nature Observatory stuffed full of papier-mâché reproductions of birds, which Rexio would have quite enjoyed sniffing around if he were not already completely lost and quite flustered! It was not as high as the Empire State Building and looked a lot stranger, but it offered a viewpoint and a landmark. He headed towards it.

From the castle you could, as he suspected, get a good view of the surrounding area. Below he could see a large pond with a boulder-strewn shoreline and beyond that a great expanse of green, a luxurious carpet of grass that stretched as far as he could tell. You could even see the buildings at the edges of the park and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people.

The park was beginning to fill up for a weekend festival of art, music and food by the lakeside. There were steel bands and klezmer bands and salsa bands setting up and tuning their instruments. There were mask-making workshops and puppet shows, clowns and circus gymnasts. There were stalls selling delicious portions of jerk chicken, goat curry, roti, callaloo, coconut bread, corn tamales, tostones, roasted peppers, pupusas, chilis, mangoes and watermelons. It was feast for his nose but something else drew his attention.

In the distance, in the far distance, he could hear the sound of drummers drumming. In amongst the many drums he could hear a sound as familiar to him as the beat of his heart. He could hear, ever so faintly but unmistakable, the *djembe* calling out to him with an insistent tempo. It was Michael's drum; it could be no other. He squealed with joy, drawing some attention to himself, causing one child nearby to shout out, 'Omigod! It's a rat! Daddy, shoot it with your gun!'

Rexio scrambled down the rocks as quickly as he could, away from the gawping group of humans. He followed the pulsating rhythm, a hidden pathway across the grass, a beacon of sound. It was unrelenting, beating out the minutes of the hour and the hours into the golden light of afternoon, as the drummer's circle played and played on. The park was heaving with people of all shapes and sizes and colours. Rexio, fearful of the immensity of the space and the growing crowds, kept to the fringes of the great lawn, within easy reach of cover.

There were times when he became confused as other musicians began to play and the sounds from impromptu jam sessions floated across the grass from all directions, a

tangle of melodies he struggled through. He also noticed there were changes in the density of drums, as some drummers absented themselves and others joined. For what seemed a horrible length of time, the *djembe* fell silent. He anxiously chewed his nails, thinking that Michael and his drum had gone away. But as discouragement began to cloud his mind, the *djembe* began to pulse again with renewed energy and Rexio dashed forward once more with a new determination to reach the source.

The beat of the drum grew ever closely and closer, urging him on, until he could clearly see the circle of drummers and the drum with its red, green and gold heraldry, Michael stood there, crouched over the drum, knees bent, energy flowing from the underside of his arms through his elbows and wrists to his hands, bouncing on the balls of his feet to the rhythm that brought them all together, the drummers, the dancing and moving crowd and the little mouse whose adventure was nearly at an end.

Kathleen sat on a blanket on the grass, exhausted from a day of dancing, her eyes closed but listening to the voice of the drum. Rexio crawled over to her picnic hamper and climbed inside, sneaking under a blue cloth that smelt of fresh breadcrumbs. He hoped she would be cooking *casamiento* tonight, for he was very, very hungry. His great adventure was over. At least, for now.