

Of Man and Mouse

Elly and I walked in a few inches of new snow down the dirt road that wound through manzanita brush and ponderosa pine trees. In the old cemetery at the end of the road, we looked at headstones that told some of the history of the ridge in the foothills of the Sierras. Sun shone on us from a deep blue mountain sky.

We walked out of the fenced graveyard and stood entwined on the bluffs above the steep canyon. A few hundred feet below us, snow gave way to open ground. Only rain had visited the canyon below us and most of the way up the steep canyon walls.

Elly said, "This is lovely, but I have to go back. I have to finish a paper for class tomorrow."

We walked back to the small cabin without electricity or plumbing, with water only from the spring a hundred feet down the slope from the cabin in densely growing black locust trees.

Elly worked toward her degree three days a week at the college far down the mountain on the valley floor. I worked odd jobs where I could find them among widely-scattered habitation on the ridge while I tried to decide if I would return to college or if I would find some as yet unknown direction to aim my existence toward, that would allow me to stay in the mountains, away from most of the densely-inhabited modern world.

Elly sat at the desk by the window and wrote. I walked out to the storeroom off the back porch to see what I could find to build our lunch from.

When I returned to the main part of the cabin and shut the door behind me, I said, "We have a mouse."

"Did you see it?"

"No, but we have mouse droppings in the storeroom."

"A mouse wouldn't eat much, would it?"

"No. They're only about so big. Mice would probably be pretty clean around here. Not much in the way of human habitation."

That night, I did see him. Clattering dishes woke me. I got out of bed and got the flashlight. The mouse stood at the back of the first shelf and looked out at me, nervous, as if he wanted to run, but he couldn't see out of the bright circle of light.

I said, "There's lots of stuff in the back room. Why don't you do your work back there?" I said, "Hey, you want to see the mouse?"

Elly sat up in bed, looked to one side and then to the other, looked a little frantic, and then lay back down. Then she woke up and asked me, "What'd you say?"

"The mouse is over here." But he broke out of the spot of light. He ran behind the cupboard and down the wall under the drainboard. I tried to stop him by putting the light on him again, but that didn't seem to bother him anymore. He felt his way along the wall, stopped twice and looked up into the light, then ran down over the side of the drainboard and along the wood stacked underneath. I moved the light ahead to try to see where he was going, and when I moved it back, he was gone. I said, "He's gone."

Elly said, "I'll probably get to see him another time."

I heard the mouse in the dark hours of the morning, but I didn't do anything about it. It was too cold to get up. When we did get up, we found mouse droppings along the drainboard and scraped out spots in the butter, with claw marks so tiny they looked like several strands of hair had been dragged through.

Elly drove down the mountain for college classes. I hiked over the ridge in more new snow to visit my neighbor. I told him about the mouse. He said, "I got several boxes of Decon. That's good stuff. It burns 'em inside and they run for water. As soon as that water goes down, they're dead. You can take a box with you."

"I don't think I will. Thanks anyway. Maybe one mouse won't hurt much."

"You wait, though. Cold weather like this, they move in from the fields. You'll have hundreds of 'em over there. That's why I keep a cat."

I could take some Decon over and put it out on those days Elly's gone. She doesn't have to know about it. But I didn't even like the idea myself. Why should I poison him? He couldn't eat enough to matter. And it came out the same anyway, because if Elly noticed the mouse wasn't around and mentioned it, I'd tell her what happened, and that wouldn't be any different from doing it when she was there.

The first morning I was alone in the cabin, I heard the mouse moving around while it was still dark. He scraped and banged something metallic. I tried to remember if I'd left anything out I cared enough about to get up for. I couldn't think of anything. I said, "Be quiet."

I was nearly asleep again when he banged metal on metal. I got up, turned on the flashlight, and chased him over the drainboard and along the woodpile. He ran down between two pieces of wood, and I kicked the wood. Just then, if I'd been able to catch him in the wood pile, I'd have crushed him with a chunk of wood and not thought twice about it, thrown him outside for something's food. He was a mouse, and people kill mice.

I picked up my watch. Fifteen to five. I decided to stay up. I could arrange my hours so he wouldn't be able to use things in the early morning, and maybe he would stay out in the storeroom.

There were a lot of droppings in the cupboards and on the drainboard. They gave off a sharp, penetrating odor. I cleaned everything up, but the smell lingered. I moved the wood around and swept out. I said, "Mouse, don't come back in here and do that kind of thing again."

He'd been into two cubes of butter and the flour and ripped the tinfoil on the honey can. I thought about the mouse that fell into our honey can when we camped at King's Creek, and I pulled the tinfoil back to see, but I already knew he wouldn't be in there, because I'd seen him after I heard him messing with it.

I kept saying him, but I thought there might be more than one. Maybe one worked the storeroom and one worked the kitchen. Or more than that in both places. We had a lot of droppings around for just one mouse. If there was just one, it could be a female, but I didn't want to think about that.

The mouse adjusted its hours to my hours. I went to bed early. Before midnight, it made noise in the dishes, and I said, "How can such a small animal make so much noise? Are you deliberately clumsy?" I turned the flashlight that way. I threw my boot at the mouse. My boot bounced off the wall, and the mouse, disappeared into the wood pile. I went over and scattered the wood, made a lot of noise. "Now don't come back, see? You'd better decide that people are dangerous and go someplace else."

I sat and waited. When he came back, I threw a rolled newspaper at him. It smacked the wall above him and bounced, and he left in a hurry. I said, "That's the last time. No bad habits in this house. Stay in the storeroom if you want to, but don't come out here anymore. I suspect you of polluting our silverware and dishes besides making a lot of unnecessary noise."

The fire burned down. It turned cold in the cabin. I walked

out and looked at the half-moon directly overhead, moonlight bright on the snow. I felt cold, and I went back in and went to bed.

When I heard him again, I didn't think about it for very long. I got up and took my pistol from the desk drawer. It was three o'clock. I dressed, loaded my pistol, and operated the slide. I lay the cold, heavy automatic on the desk next to the flashlight. I sat in the dark and waited. Cold seeped into the cabin and into me.

I heard him in the dishes. I clicked the light on. He looked down at me from the edge of the shelf, black eyes bright in the light. I braced the pistol on top of the desk and held the light beneath it. I silhouetted the sights against the circle of light. I lined the sights up on his head. There weren't any dishes behind him. I squeezed the trigger.

Pistol blast roared inside the cabin much louder than I'd expected, hurt my ears as the muzzle flash stunned my eyes.

Outside, the black and white bitch who sleeps under the cabin went wild, barking in panic. She came with the cabin, and she's been afraid of men, because the guy who used to live here was really mean to her, but gradually, she's learned to trust me.

I opened the door and said, "Spot, shut up." She barked and ran up the road, stopped and looked back toward the house, shrieking in her panic.

I walked toward her. I said, "Spot, it's okay. Shut up. Spot, shut up, please." She ran farther up the road and turned to face me, still barking. I carried the pistol. Maybe she understood that. I walked back to the cabin, went inside, unloaded the pistol, and put it away.

Spot quit barking after a while, but when I went out to talk to her, she ran under the cabin and wouldn't come out.

At daylight, I got up and checked the cupboard. A twenty-two caliber bullet is small, but it's bigger than a mouse's head.

I cleaned the cupboard. Quiet lay heavy on the ridge just at sunrise. My ears still hurt from the loud blast the pistol made inside the cabin. My head hurt a little. Maybe that was from the loud noise and the bright flash from my pistol. The morning stayed really quiet for a long time. Then I heard Spot moving outside and an owl calling from far down the ridge.