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The Mouse

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The Mouse

It's funny, how you know something is dead right when you see it. It's as if that part of you that's too old for anyone to trace, that you sometimes forget is there, comes out and says 'See, that's death, that's what I've been keeping you from.' It's the difference between the birds you know you can fix – the ones where, if you just gently pull their necks back out, they'll be okay - and the ones you can't. The ones where you get that feeling like they're not there anymore, even before you notice their necks are too crooked. Earlier that evening, when I crouched down next to the cage and saw the gray fur, limp in a ball of shavings, I knew. The ball wasn't cute, or peaceful, just hollow.

"Would anyone like to say a few words?" I ask the question to the pair of them, watching shifts in the darkness as moonlight falls across their faces. I'd assumed Alice might want to because she was the one who had brought him home, the mouse that is.

It's true I hadn't liked Speedy. Growing up we used to set the barn cats on the mice for fear they'd spook the other animals. So, when Alice produced the gray ball from her jacket pocket, saying she'd rescued him from the pet store, I found her affection unfounded, dramatized. I mean, I understood a dog or a cat. But whenever I hold a mouse in my hand, I feel like I'm gonna break it, who really wants that?

Matt had first tried to convince her to take it back with warnings of rabies or rat flu, which Alice promptly googled and found doesn't exist. So then he read the online horror stories, of whole families getting sick because mice were in the pantry. But from the way it curled up in her hands, I knew she wasn't taking it back. I didn't like the mouse, but I also didn't really care, and I'm sure Alice sensed I wasn't the one who needed convincing. Matt could be firm when he wanted, but Alice was stubborn as hell. With a defeated shrug from Matt, and my ambivalent agreement, the mouse stayed.

Alice nods and steps forward towards the crevice. From the light of the phone I can see the little body curled underneath the rocks.

"You wrote it down?" Matt looks at Alice incredulously.

"Of course I wrote something down, he was *our* mouse. He deserves a proper funeral!"

"I didn't realize most mice have a funeral."

"Well, they don't. That's why he's our mouse, so he can have one."

"Oh yes, I'm so glad we rescued a mouse just to make sure that when he died, he got a proper funeral."

Alice's breathing sounds a little louder in the sudden silence. She stopped moving and just stares.

"Shut the fuck up Matt." I glare at him before putting my arm around Alice. We hadn't had Speedy for that long, twelve weeks maybe. Mice aren't supposed to live very long, a year or two, but we didn't know his age when we got him. Well, twelve weeks isn't quite the same as one hundred and four weeks. "He was already old. He had 3 months of the good life" I mutter to her. "A really great mouse life, actually."

"C'mon, say what you wrote," Matt jumps in. "You're the one that made us keep him in the first place." The darkness shifts again as he nudges her. "Al, I'm sure what you have is great."

The snow is up to our knees. It's the reason why I suggested this crevice in the first place. The cold made the ground too hard to dig a deep enough hole so the melting snow wouldn't uncover the body in the spring.

"Alright, alright, just let me grab the candle." We watch, confused, as she rummages in her pocket, pulling out one the half-melted candles from Matt's birthday the night before. As the lighter sparks, a flame flashes, pitching the snow and darkness into conflict: the sudden brightness is unfit for a night as blanketed as this one.

I can't help but shake my head at her flair for dramatic irony as Matt gapes, finally finding the words to speak, "Alice, you brought birthday candles to a funeral."

"A mouse funeral," she corrects him. "Don't worry, I'll bring fireworks to yours," she teases with a wink. As the candle catches, she composes her face with a reserved smile. She begins by addressing the crevice, "Speedy, you were a hell of a good mouse," her solemnity pulls at the corner of my mouth as I try not to laugh. "And you were made even better by proving Matt wrong and never biting me and probably never having rabies." Matt shakes his head chuckling. Neither of them can conceal their smiles. "May you rest in peace." In the quiet, all of us kept breathing, the cold kept pricking at my skin, keeping my senses alert. "Well, is he safely in there?"

"Yeah, Al, I can't see him." I'd unrolled the little body out from the tissue where the rock dipped down, he wouldn't roll or move away. "I mean, something will find him eventually. I'm sure in the winter some—"

"Give it back to nature, I know,"

"If you're uncomfortable with that, with the idea of something eat —"

"No, it's just a body. A mouse body." She gave me a wry smile, "*we fat all creatures else to fat us and we fat ourselves for maggots.*" Both Matt and I groan, only Alice would bring this back to literature. I swear she quotes "Hamlet" five times a day. She turns to me, "did you bring the?"

"Yeah, lemme grab it." I pull out the handle from my bag and take a swig before passing it over to her outstretched hand. We keep passing it around the circle. As always, Alice stops drinking first and it's just Matt and me handing it off over the grave.

And still, none of us move. None of us move from the silly, little mouse that Alice brought back to the apartment on a whim. None of us disturb the night, one of those with the darkness of which you're conscious. One of those that makes you want to breathe in the forest and the stars and never move again.

"Oh, fuck!"

I whirl around to watch Alice vigorously shaking her hand, the offending drops of melted wax already congealed again on her skin. The candle had fallen in the snow, now extinguished. "Perhaps we should go," I offer.

Alice nods, now massaging the reddening skin.

"Wait, wait. One more thing." Matt crouches in the snow, having picked up the stub of wax that the candle once was. He clicks on his lighter and holds it aloft. We watch confused at first as he starts tracing letters in the snow. S-p-e-e-d-y. "Well," he mutters getting to his feet. "If we're going to give him a proper funeral, he'd better have some sort of headstone."

Matt puts his arm around a smiling and shivering Alice as I turn to lead our funeral party back to the trail. Since we had arrived, the sky shifted from blue to an all-consuming black that makes the stars seem distant and the blackness stretch and threaten to suffocate. And as the lampposts began to dot the distance, our makeshift grave melts into the darkness behind us.