

My Small Murders

Why has man just these species of animals for his neighbor; as if nothing but a mouse could have filled this crevice?

Thoreau

The Problem

Year before last, my wife and I were catching mice in our apartment. As many as three or four daily. We used every kind of trap on the market, as well as dish towels and buckets, grocery bags and brooms. Some catches were painless, and the mice released unharmed to the out-of-doors; others were gruesome, sad sights of broken bodies.

It had started simply enough, with a single furry visitor--a pretty creature, we thought, its dark gray fur lustrous from meticulous grooming. (One book on mice describes their hygiene as "fastidious.") We joked: People pay good money for mice at pet stores, don't they? And we joked some more: If we made available an exercise wheel, would the mouse give it a spin? This one was remarkably brazen, wandering into the living room to browse and sniff while we sat nearby and watched in disbelief.

Alas, where there is one mouse, there are many more. Soon we found ourselves startled by a furry fleeing flurry whenever we flicked on the kitchen light.

Pets

Teri has never liked animals, one way or the other. This should have given me pause when we first met, and now it's not clear which one of us was more deceiving or self-deceiving, she in her

pretense of liking Celeste, my fat aged Tortie, or I in my blindness to her obvious discomfort. Her allergy didn't seem a *serious* allergy. After we moved in together, she—I thought—had accommodated herself to a compromise of sorts.

I wanted to make her happy. So, after her many complaints, eventually I gave Celeste to a cat-needy family. Teri resented that I had waited so long. Since she had never owned a pet, not even a fish, there was no way I could make her understand the difficulty of losing what was, in essence, a member of my family.

All of this is by way of saying that, soon after Celeste's departure, our place was overrun by mice, though only once had we seen Celeste catch a mouse--which I took from her and released into the alley.

A Man's Job

Although I said "we" were catching mice, the truth is that Teri refused to take any responsibility for their extrication and/or extermination. She didn't have the stomach for it, she said.

I didn't either. But somebody had to take control, I insisted.

"You make a project of everything," Teri had often complained because I am capable of tremendous, sometimes obsessive, focus when I set out to accomplish a task, as when I spackled and painted the apartment in a single weekend. My projects could be intrusive and irritating, I was the first to admit. This was one instance, however, where it seemed Teri didn't mind my "project mode."

No need to get into the touchy gender-typed assumptions we make about hunting and trapping, how it has traditionally been man's work. Suffice it to say, if I were successful--and I *would* be successful--I would prove to Terri that she had married the right man.

Why did I feel the need to prove anything?

By this time we had been married for only two years, after a dizzying one-year courtship. Friends and family had warned us to slow down because both of us were coming from recent divorces. Our first marriages we put down to youthful ignorance. This, our second, was sure to last because we thought ourselves so well matched. We were both writers, after all: she a maximalist, me a minimalist.

Still, there were conflicts and misunderstandings we had to negotiate, as every couple must. Our small apartment—bought with a loan from her father-- increased the stress of living together as each of us worked our day jobs, wrote in the off-hours, sent out our fiction, and fretted about getting published.

Mice, those small surprises at every turn, only made things worse. Their sudden, startling appearances were like cruel practical jokes

Trapping

As I began trapping—first with Sav-a-Lifes--I kept count of the catch. It seemed a kind of game. But then my captures and later my killings became so numerous that, in disgust and dismay, I stopped counting, with thirty-one dead mice on my conscience. If heaped together, they would have filled a bucket.

Would they never stop coming?

George, the Exterminator

Our Co-op manager sent over his exterminator, a middle-aged fellow who reminded me of former heavyweight world champion boxer George Foreman.

I heard him before I saw him, thumping laboriously up our six flights of stairs. One of his legs was prosthetic, apparently. It was a hot August morning and I felt badly for him.

"You got no weight on you," he said by way of introduction, meaning, I supposed, that I was slim enough to take the stairs lightly or that I was wasting away, maybe from worry over mice.

I introduced myself with a polite nod (Does one shake hands with one's exterminator?), and George nodded in return, smiling his benevolent George-Forman smile, sweat streaking down his hairless scalp.

After I explained my problem, he said, "Mice, you know, got no bones, they slide right under the door, you can't keep 'em out, you've got to *discourage* them." With poison, he meant.

"No bones?" I echoed.

"You want to find them," he continued, "you look for their drippings."

"Drippings?"

"Like so." With two large fingers he pointed to the baseboard under the living room window.

Droppings, he meant.

Teri and I found a trail of them every morning along the edges of our kitchen counter, which I wiped down with bleach before attempting breakfast.

"You mind?" George asked, raising his thin brows at me and nodding to the open bedroom door.

I motioned him forward, though I must have looked skeptical.

He reached into the plastic garbage bag he was carrying and retrieved a small black plastic box the size and shape of a covered butter dish. He then filled this with poison that looked like bright blue, powdered laundry detergent. The hole at either end of the butter dish would accommodate even the fattest mouse.

"Mice run in here for eats," George explained, "then go off and die."

By the time he was done, he and his assistant had set those little black boxes of poison along baseboards, in closets, behind furniture, and in every corner of the apartment. It seemed wasteful and, worse, dangerous. I was thinking of airborne toxins.

A number of questions occurred to me: How much poison kills a mouse? Is this blue powder universally appetizing to rodents? I mean, there must be some persnickety feeders out there, a few of the fittest who will survive this attempt at genocide. I began to think of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, of a holocaust. Of mice languishing in the walls of my apartment. The stench of death.

I found George peering behind the gas stove in our tiny kitchen. "Here's where they're comin'." He nodded at gas-pipe hole in the wall.

"But it's so high," I protested.

He laughed: "Mice can climb."

Jesus Christ, I know nothing about mice, I realized.

George stuffed the hole with steel wool, something mice can't chew through, he informed me.

"That should do," he said. The sweat dripping down his face didn't seem to bother him.

He thumped out of the kitchen. He hadn't been in the apartment for more than ten minutes.

"You got more problems, I'll come back," he promised.

After he left--I was surprised at how well he took the stairs (going down looked harder than going up)--more questions occurred to me: How long does the poison last? How long do I keep the black boxes in our apartment?

Appetite

The way George described them, mice seemed as relentless as cockroaches. Our cockroaches, by the way, those fig-sized waterbugs that occasionally found their way up from the basement, had disappeared. Mice eat cockroaches, though they'll leave the antenna and legs.

Mice, in fact, will eat just about anything. Chew the insulation off your wiring, the bindings off your books, the laces off your shoes, eventually bring the whole damned house down around you. Some of the stunning facts I learned as I began to research the history and

habits of mice: mice can live without water. In times of famine, they will submit to a quasi-hibernation. Or they will eat their own shit.

More Mouse Advantage

Contrary to what George-the-exterminator said, mice do have bones, but they are capable of remarkable compression. A half inch may be enough for mice to slip through. More disturbing is their prodigious climbing: aided by tiny toe nails, they easily clamber up lamp cords, curtains, couches, chair-backs, you name it. Which is why we found droppings or "drippings," as George called them, on window sills, desk tops, bookshelves. Most disturbing of all is their rate of reproduction. A mature mouse, two months old, can have five to twelve pups every month. Which is why the Romans used to say, "It's raining mice."

Fading Hope

The poison seemed to have no effect. If some people can live with a houseful of cats, I wondered, why couldn't we live with a houseful of mice? You'd think we'd have gotten used to them but, instead, we grew jumpier. It got to the point where Teri would make plenty of noise before entering a room--she didn't want to see little leathery tails coiling into the darkness or, worse, furry humps skittering across the kitchen counter. I tried to be braver than she but, no matter how I prepared myself, a glimpse of a fleeing mouse was always the most unpleasant surprise, like seeing a severed hand wriggling on the floor.

Maybe humans are hard-wired for certain revulsions; some part of our ancient selves knows that these visitors are bad company. They are, after all, vermin, "any of a number of small animals with filthy, destructive, troublesome habits," as Webster puts it. *Vermin* from the Latin *vermis*, "worm," probably associated first with the loathsome sight of maggots. And that's how I came to feel, that my apartment--my body--was wormy with mice.

These aren't visitors, I decided, these are parasites. They would keep coming, in ever greater numbers; they would nibble and chew and gnaw and scratch and climb and piss and shit every minute of every hour of every day, the apartment seething with their inexorable, inexhaustible scampering and scavenging until, drained of all resources and patience, Teri and I would flee in terror. The only good mouse, I concluded, is a dead mouse.

My research told me the same. "Mice are a viral reservoir!" cautioned one expert. They carry one of the deadliest of the new hemorrhagic plagues, the Hanta virus, which may be spread through the air. A disturbing thought when, every morning, I was wiping up those little black bullets of excrement from the kitchen counter with a damp paper towel.

The Truth About Freedom

How naive I had been when the mice first arrived in our apartment! I was trying to be humane, using gravity traps (an enclosed miniature see-saw of sorts, whose door slams shut as the entering mouse teeters forward to the food) and glue traps. I was setting them free--every captured mouse--in the weeds behind our apartment building. It's an arduous, nerve-racking task to extricate a mouse from a glue trap, I'll have you know. The poor creature bites at the

glutinous gel in frustration, chirping all the while like a distressed sparrow. I'd use a pencil to pull its pink, delicate paws from the mess. It takes about ten minutes and, when done, it makes you feel quite righteous. A real pro-lifer.

During the few months I was freeing my captives, I didn't know that mice have a remarkable ability to find their way home, nor did I understand that, since stray mice are not accepted by other mouse families, I was sentencing these strays to an unfortunate end. So, in my ignorance, I accomplished nothing: either the mice returned to the building, then easily to our apartment (following the scent trails of their predecessors), or they were killed by predators or by other mice. After learning this much, I had to accept my role, finally, as exterminator. This was easier than I'd like to admit.

I've been taught, by my parents especially, to be compassionate and treat all creatures with respect. An image foremost in my memory: my father on hands and knees trying to coax, in a babyish voice, a spooked squirrel from under the family's station wagon in our driveway. Ours was a household of birdwatchers and hikers, not hunters. When most of the ten-year-old boys in my neighborhood were getting .22 rifles and going deer hunting with their fathers, my father, bowing to peer pressure, took my brothers and me into the woods to shoot at tin cans. Our interest in shooting lasted less than a year. I remember my best friend taking me into his basement to show me the two deer his father was dressing. The headless, skinned carcasses dangled from the rafters by their hind legs, a steel trash can below each to catch the blood and entrails. After that, the thought of hunting sickened me.

Mickey's Friends

Because they are so small, because they are so quiet (stealthy, I'd call them), mice have a great advantage in winning sympathy. Biologist Stephen Jay Gould points out that mice look too infantile to seem harmful: "Humans feel affection for animals with juvenile features: large eyes, bulging craniums, retreating chins...." Even the mouse's scientific name, *mus musculus*, is cute, meaning, "mouse little mouse." No wonder mice have come to symbolize the long-suffering persistence of the persecuted in a world that reveres the underdog. They are the quintessential Christian symbol--the meek that will inherit the earth. Meek as a _____. Quiet as a _____.
Are you a man or a . . . ?

"Six Little Mice" by Mother Goose:

Six little mice sat down to spin.
Pussy passed by and she peeped in.
What are you doing, my little men?
Weaving coats for gentlemen.
Shall I come in and cut off your threads?
No, no, Mistress Pussy, you'd bite off our heads.
Oh, no, I'll not; I'll help you to spin.
That may be so, but you don't come in.

The Sound of One Hand Clapping

At the height of my exterminations, I often lay awake at night waiting for the snap of the traps. Nothing worked as well as the old fashioned, triggered trap. I could bait it any number of ways. Mice prefer peanut butter to cheese, I learned. I was making a science out of killing.

Sometimes, horror of horrors, the trap only maimed one. I came to dread the mornings when, half blinded by the kitchen light, I stumbled in to clean up the mess. At my most

gruesome, I wondered if leaving the corpses out would serve as a warning to other mice, like Vlad the Impaler posting heads of his victims in front of his castle. The most heartbreaking sight I came across was a two-mouse killing in the same area, where one mouse had apparently followed the other into the killing field, perhaps drawn by the sounds of the other's distress.

Mouse Tales

I knew of someone whose infestation of mice grew so overwhelming that, enraged, he sent his housemate away and spent the night batting, swatting, pounding, and pulverizing mice as they poured from the walls. I knew of a couple who set out poison to curtail their infestation but hadn't realized that the mice would return to their nests to die--inside the walls: the stink of dead mice made the house uninhabitable.

Mice have been with humankind from the earliest days, as evidenced by mouse remains found in prehistoric cave dwellings. To call them parasites is grossly inaccurate obviously. It is said that ancient Egyptians domesticated the cat in order to combat the proliferation of mice. And General Rommel, Hitler's Desert Fox, when he was in the midst of the Sahara, found a nest of mice in the tank he was driving.

Definition

A pest is a creature we can neither use nor accommodate.

Western Notions of Progress?

Mice have been with humankind from the beginning. Paleontologists find mouse remains in cave dwellings. Which is why mice are called *commensals*, those that share a table. Obviously, to call them parasites is grossly inaccurate. It is said that ancient Egyptians domesticated the cat in order to combat the proliferation of mice. And General Rommel, Hitler's Desert Fox, when he was in the midst of the Sahara, found a nest of mice in the tank he was driving.

So perhaps we're fighting a losing battle.

I like to believe that humankind makes headway, that no matter how cluttered and complicated our lives are, no matter how great our debt, no matter how overwhelming our constraints, we somehow "progress." It's the grand optimism of the Western world, this hopeful conviction that there is ultimately an endpoint, that all of this leads somewhere. But maybe, as the Ancients believed, history is cyclical and nothing really changes--mice keep coming, humans keep killing them, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

I once lived in a small apartment so infested with roaches that, in exasperation, I set off several roach bombs--those fuming cans of poison meant for, say, the entire floor of a large house. I was going to obliterate the bastards, I thought. It didn't occur to me that the roaches would simply move. Which they did *en masse*. Panicked by the gas attack, they rained down on my unfortunate neighbor in the apartment below mine. To talk of extermination is misleading, I have learned. It should be called *extrication*, unless we're willing to risk our own destruction, as in the old Warner Brothers cartoon about a hapless guy who destroys his house in his attempt to destroy a marauding fly. Obviously if we exterminate another species, we may ultimately exterminate the ecosystem that sustains us.

Although this now seems widely accepted, a commonplace of modern life, it seems, too, that few of us live by such understanding. One of the wondrous products of World War II was DDT, I recall. Dichlorodiphenyl-trichloroethane. In the late 1940s and through the 1960s, it showed itself to be a remarkably effective insecticide. Everyone, it seemed, was spraying it everywhere on any- and everything. In the South, where I grew up, mosquito-abatement trucks made the rounds every few weeks during the summer, sputtering slowly down the street and spewing clouds of DDT as we children played in the odorous fog. It was both exhilarating and terrifying to run screaming through that deadly cloud. Although we knew it was poisonous, we believed it wouldn't kill us: it was intended for mosquitoes, wasn't it?

Nowadays we're trying more subtle methods of abatement, as in sterilizing insects to diminish their propagation or, in the case of rodents, repelling them with electrical signals. At my brother's suggestion, that's what I tried next: a device the size of a pocket calculator, which you plug into an outlet, it emits ultra-sonic signals guaranteed to repel gophers, squirrels, moles, and mice. Or so the catalogue told me. A flashing red light at the top of the box indicates that it's working. Given that the mice found nothing repugnant about the two boxes I installed in our apartment, this little red light was probably the only thing working in each of my costly mechanisms. Progress?

The Way In Is the Way Out

George-the-exterminator's discovery of the hole behind the stove sent me on an expedition to find more--there had to be more holes. I spent a day working in the kitchen, seeking these out. It was under the dishwasher that I found a hole the size of my fist, a warm draft of air rising

from the bowels of the building. I found another, for the electrical line, behind the dishwasher. Cursing the lazy workmen who had left these, I stuffed the holes with steel wool, then plastered over them. Hard work worming my arms under and behind the dishwasher. Then I spent two days sealing the rest of the apartment, caulking the seams of the baseboards and the cracks in the closets. The place felt as tight as a sail boat and, at last, I felt in control of our little world, here on the top floor of our aged brownstone.

A Surprise

Not long after this, Teri announced that our marriage was over. It seemed a cliché, her telling me she needed "space." She felt claustrophobic, she said.

"You mean our apartment's too small?" I asked.

"Our *marriage* is too small." Having packed her bags, she was going to spend the weekend with Colleen, a friend in Hampden.

Why had I not seen how unhappy Teri was?

I said: "I know we've been tense lately, ever since the mice—"

"It's got nothing to do with mice."

"The mice haven't helped," I said.

"I'm leaving," she said.

"Jesus, Teri, it's not like you're trapped—I mean, what I have I done?"

She stared down at her carry-on and pensively wheeled it back and forth as she spoke: it wasn't me, she said; it wasn't another man; it wasn't like we'd done anything wrong as a couple—

“Fuck that,” I blurted, “*something’s* gone wrong!”

At last she sighed. “Yes,” she said, “*I’ve* gone wrong. I shouldn’t have married you. It just all happened so fast and”

“And what?” I wailed.

“And I’ve realized that I’ve loved you only . . . as a friend.”

I gaped at her. I hadn’t heard a line like that since I was in high school.

It took Teri two hours to explain that our marriage had been ill advised from the start. At last she said, “Give me six months and we’ll see what happens.”

Timeline

It had taken us at least six months to realize that we had a mouse problem. And more than six months to rid our apartment of these pests. What could I possibly expect of Teri in a mere six months?

After her return, I moved into an aged highrise nearby. These were inhabited mostly by old folk and college students. The halls stank of insecticide. I was subletting from a young woman who had moved to Seattle for the fall to see if she and her long-distance boyfriend were ready for marriage.

There were no mice in her apartment as far as I could tell. For this, I was grateful.

Friends No More

Teri and I tried to go out "as friends" but I couldn't manage it and, in anger, I broke off relations. Then we tried marriage counseling, which she broke from, also in anger because she didn't like what the words the therapist was using: "dysfunction" . . . "transference" . . . "pathology."

Now we are negotiating our divorce.

I know--and I suspect she knows--that our mutual anger is a product of our profound dismay in ourselves and in each other. It's surprising, and frightening, how much wrong we can find with each other when we look only for the wrong.

The Apartment

Both of us have since given up the apartment, which is now for sale. One of its great selling points is that the place is mouse-free. "You should know," I tell prospective buyers, who tolerate my tour with admirable patience, "that all of these old buildings downtown have mice. There's no way of getting rid of them, you can only shut them out." Then I recount the many, painstaking steps I took to achieve this. "Nothing can get in," I conclude proudly.

And nothing can get out either, I tell myself. The place is like a tomb.

Metaphor

I can't help thinking it was emblematic of our relationship that Teri refused to have anything to do with the mice, while I was relegated to the role of their executioner. Here I thought we were building something and all the while she saw things crumbling around us. Although, obviously,

the mice had nothing to do with the demise of our marriage, the synchronicity of their demise and ours seems too tidy for comfort.

Me and My Shadow

The house in which I now live has two cats. Upon moving in, I was convinced that this place would be mouse free. Here's a sure-fire way to check for mice after you've moved into a new place: open up the top of the stove and look under and around the burners. See any droppings? They may be old, so clean them out, then check it again in a week. I have done this and have learned that the droppings return--we do indeed have mice. But the cats keep them at bay.

Whenever I notice one of the cats crouching on the kitchen floor and staring intently into the dark gap between the stove and the dishwasher, I know there's a mouse back there, in the darkness, contemplating the possibilities. I try to view this as an acceptable compromise. Just last night, though, I dreamed of seeing a fat mouse darting across the stove top. It was as disturbing a sight as ever, and I had the sense that my life will never be as settled or predictable as I would like. Now, when I think of mice, I imagine them running in exercise wheels, hundreds, thousands, of mice wheeling round and round, and I am appalled at their tireless energy, at their endless turning, as if together they were the world's engine, the strength of their lowly multitude joined in a single, mindless task.