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Murder and Musings at Two A.M.

by

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I've taken a life tonight and I can't sleep.

I'm sitting twenty-six inches from the murder site, staring at a thin thread of gore on the carpet. It's quiet now, the only sounds the steady breath of the humidifier and my restless son, safe in the oblivion of nocturnal dreams. The poor-white-trash plastic on the bedroom window expands with a sudden gust of wintry wind, sounding like the crinkle of paper folding, unfolding, folding again. It's dark. I've disposed of the body already. I doubt anyone saw me, but then in this neighborhood you never really know. It's out there now, the cold probably already stiffening the joints.

My kids don't know what I've done.

I guess it all started about two weeks ago, when Will spotted the intruder in the pantry. It scared the yell right out of him. He started screaming, "I saw a mice! I saw a

mice!” with small hands clutched to his chest as if his fingers might suddenly reach out and touch the thing without his say-so.

I’d thought it was a shadow.

He’s good at spotting the little boogers--practically an expert in identification and capture--and trained by the best: Grandma. I, however, had no experience with such things. I had once been married to a man who thrives on violence. It had definitely had its perks.

I decided to set a trap. After all, it’s what we humans do--seek out and kill the smaller and weaker among us who we perceive as not belonging. Even our own kind. My stepdad showed me how to bait the spring-loaded contraption with a tiny bit of cheese. “More humane,” he’d said. “Quick. Won’t even know what hit him.”

I set the trap. Waited.

The next morning I eased the pantry door open, eyes squeezed shut, envisioning the blood and guts that would have surely spattered my walls, entrails staining the old linoleum a purple crimson. I’d have to throw everything out. Start over. Take money out of savings to restock the pantry. Somehow, though, I still couldn’t bring myself to believe the critter would even consider going after a piece of cheese on a trap. Could it really be that stupid? Had its ancestor’s past experiences with humans taught it nothing?

I flipped on the light. Leaned over the trash can, steeled myself, pried open my eyes. Looked.

The trap sat right where I’d put it, unsprung. Cheese gone.

Tricky little shadow.

I bought glue traps at Wal-Mart. The little black ones. They smelled like old hairspray and I wondered what the allure was. I also wondered how the thing had gotten into my house and finally came to the conclusion that it'd hitched a ride on the Christmas tree. It had been on the back porch for nearly a year, wrapped in a box wrapped in plastic. Cozy.

Knowing there was no way it would smell that awful smell and be enticed to investigate, I put a dab of peanut butter in the center of the glue. Just to be sure.

I set the trap. Waited.

The next morning I flipped on the light, fearless. This would not be gory. I wouldn't have to restock. I was saving money *and* I could set the little booger free, far away in that vast utopia of a field east of town.

The peanut butter was in a different place, pushed off to the side. Footprints. Tiny ones.

And poop.

I knew it without a doubt. This shadow was mocking me.

I bought bigger glue traps at K-Mart. Rat-sized. These smelled like the others but I left them alone, figuring the trap people knew what they were doing and I was probably just messing with a good thing. I was on a mission, a huntress. A warrior. Like Xena. I set a big one *and* a little one on the floor along the baseboard. No escape.

The next morning I flipped on the light and glanced at the traps. Nothing. Not even a nudge. Good.

The following days followed the same routine. Opening, flipping, glancing, shrugging. Good. I decided that it had left, uninterested in what I had to offer. It'd probably found better pickings at Larisa's anyway. She has a ferret. I wondered if one of Cynthia's cats had got hold of it, just one more morsel in the food chain. Natural selection. Good.

I left the traps to their odorous duty and went on, blithely thinking I was rid of the unclean thing.

I'd been dreaming of a man I once knew. We were careening along on bicycles, he on a lower ridge than I. Which says a lot, I think, although I don't interpret dreams. The poor-white-trash plastic bowed, doing its best to ward off the biting wind and not let me down. Paper folding, unfolding.... Crinkling, uncrinkling.... Barren branches thumped the roof.

That's what woke me.

I lay on the bed, listening for several minutes before I figured out it wasn't only the plastic wrap on the window. There was something else. Softer, more erratic. Sharper here, barely audible there. My breath hitched.

I listened.

The sound came from Will's toys, piled high in two Rubbermaid laundry baskets by the closet.

My heart thumped in my chest. Something was *in* there.

I listened.

The trashy plastic sang.

Tap...tap...ta—

I slithered out of bed, the steel frame groaning under my weight, then crept down the stairs to the kitchen pantry. I grabbed The Big One, dropped a bit of p.b. in the middle and headed back upstairs. In the dark, I put the trap near the toy baskets, inched backward to Will's bed. Held my breath, waited.

Branches thumped. Paper folding... Ten minutes. Maybe the thing had followed me. Couldn't it smell that fabulous morsel of nut and butter, salt and oil?

I went back downstairs. To get the "humane" trap. Wouldn't know what hit him. Right? I sliced the tiniest bit of cheese from the wedge, set it near the trigger and slunk back to the bedroom, knowing there was no way the critter would go after a piece of cheese on a trap. Could it really be that stupid...?

Had its ancestor's past exper—

I laid the trap on the other side of the Rubbermaid basket and climbed back into bed, covered up, closed my eyes...drifted....

It was a horrible sound. First the initial snap, but then...then there was a sort of *pop*, as if the action played out in two parts. It got away, I thought. Its tail got caught—
snap, then it took off running, whacking the trap into the wall and breaking free—pop.

The plastic crackled, bowed with the chill wind trying to reach inside and steal my breath.

I flipped on the light. Looked, knowing there was *no way*....

Its tiny gray body curled off the side of the wooden contraption, almost exactly where I'd set it. No blood splattered the walls. No guts to suck up with the steam cleaner. Just a tiny, soft, gray body. Unmoving. Quiet.

Dead.

How could that be? With all the instincts evolution passes on from one generation to the next, how could it *not know* what humans are capable of, how territorial we biped animals can be? I eased to the floor, telling myself it was the sudden brightness of the light making my eyes water. “You were supposed to go to the other one,” I whispered, not liking the way my stomach felt, the way my heart seemed to beat every other beat. The way my eyes watered because yesterday I’d put two bulbs in the ceiling dome instead of one.

And suddenly I wondered what my dad, a decent Buddhist, would think of me. He takes spiders outside and sets them free. He caught a tarantula in my room when I was eleven, captured it in a glass jar and let it go by the rock retainer wall. Every summer he sets a trap to lure the squirrels out of the attic, then one by one takes the bushy-tailed visitors to the park and lets them go. I’d been raised to believe that ALL life was sacred, whether curiously different from me or frighteningly similar. And now, as an adult, just beginning to understand the continuity of life, how everything is connected, and my role in this strange web we share, I haul off and head for the easy road. The cowardly path.

I remember my ex telling me how he’d step on the glue traps one by one, the vibration of crunching bones wending up through the sole of his New Balance running shoe. I had wondered about his soul.

Now I wonder about my own.

Sitting here, the bright light stinging my eyes so they water in streams, I wonder if this tiny creature showed up for a reason, wonder how this lost and lonely stranger found

its way to my home. Why it came here. Just to give me something else to do? Being a single working mother isn't keeping me busy enough? Or maybe it was a guardian for Will. After all, *he'd* been the first—the only—to spot it and only minutes ago it had been frolicking in *his* toys, in *his* room. Maybe it was the soul of a long-past friend or relative, checking in, checking up. There's no reason we couldn't have kept the critter as a pet, fed it well, watched it die all on its own without human hardware and weaponry, human arrogance and selfishness.

It occurs to me that the only time I've seen the thing is now, dead. I never saw it skittering from this dropped pancake crumb to that piece of toasted bagel, jumping from shadow to shadow undetected so it could keep a watchful eye out for Will.

I know now this whole thing has been a mistake, a test that I have successfully failed. The realization is clear in the chill of the wind, the thump of barren branches, the lump in my throat...the way the poor-white-trash plastic over the window keeps billowing and crinkling, singing in that papery voice.

My kids don't know what I've done.

I think I just killed my son's angel.

