

Once many, many years ago we lived in a rental home that was beautiful and perfect and fulfilled an answer to prayer. It was situated across the street from the ocean on the Island. And no matter what task we tended to, there sat the big blue ocean calling us. The house, grand and beautiful sitting upon the hill, was not without its problems though. The greatest of which was its severe lack of insulation which resulted in bitter cold winters, and mice.

The cold is something we learned to adapt to, but the mice were another story altogether. There was nothing that could block them out. With bits of straw in the walls for insulation, it was ripe for the annual mouse invasion. A mouse or two, when you live in the country is not a surprise, but one year we had far more than one or two.

That house was situated beside a farmer's field which often had sheep and alpaca in it. Like all good farmers, this one rotated his livestock and his pastures. Thus, the year of *The Great Mouse Invasion* he'd moved his livestock out of the field and was growing poppies. This was not a small field, it stretched as far beyond us as the eye could see, and even behind our small lizard infested backyard.

Across the street from us was another farmer who decided the time had come to narrow his land to just enough space for one or two cows. So, while the field behind, and beside us, was being harvested of medicinal poppies, the farmer across from us harvested his final hay crop before selling off his property.

On our other side sat a vacant home. Until it wasn't. It seemed that, just like the farmers needed to harvest their crops, the owner of the home decided it was time to return, mow his six foot tall yard, and put the house up for sale.

And that left us, in our big beautiful home, as sitting ducks for the influx of rodents seeking shelter from the upheaval in their world. Maybe we weren't loud enough, maybe we were too welcoming, whatever the case was, those fuzzy gray rodents were not afraid to make themselves at home.

One morning, while I was making breakfast, I heard a rustling beside the trash can. Now I can face many things quite bravely, but rodents are my downfall. So, I grabbed the broom and

knocked the trash can lid off only to discover a mouse scurrying up the side of the bin staring at me.

I jumped so high I cleared the floor, and the counter, and landed atop the breakfast bar while screaming to the children, “Go get your father!” The thing was, the kids were in hysterical fits of laughter at witnessing their mother fling the trash can lid across the house, and then jump high enough that she hit her head on the ceiling.

I’d love to say, we dealt with that mouse and that was the end of the entire situation. But it was not. It was only the beginning. Things got worse. Much worse. Like the day I opened the pantry and noticed the proof that mice had been partying there all night. Who knows, maybe a few were still lurking. I slammed the door shut, stood against it for a minute before remembering the mice could easily climb through the slats in the door, and took off running through the house screaming like a lunatic.

Surely, you may think that this is the end of the chaos. But it’s not. We thought it was, for a span of time. Things had settled down. The pantry was cleaned, and everything in jars no longer showed evidence of any kind of party happening within it. The bin no longer made funny sounds and I was beginning to feel less terrified at throwing things away again. The kids had given up watching to see when I’d repeat jumping that high.

And then my husband went to the mainland to photograph a wedding. The week before he left I’d started to notice the subtle signs of rodents nearby. The scratching in the wall. The rustling behind the fridge. Thus, on the day of his departure he dutifully set out traps. He assured me all would be well and not to even think about the traps he’d deal with them when he got home.

The first night he was gone, I tucked the kids in bed, and then retreated to the tv room. I had this great idea that I could break out a movie I’d been given six months ago and never watched. Five minutes into the show a mouse came racing out of the closet, and scurried right under the red chair I was sitting in. It did not come out. It did not run behind the chair and around the room, it did not pop out the side or the front. And so, I did the only thing I could. I screamed.

I screamed so loud and so long that our dog looked up at me, let out a groan of misery and *left* the room. I jumped from chair to rolling chair, to anything that didn't mean putting a bare foot on the floor, looking like I was playing some wild game of "the floor is lava".

The whole week went something like that. Me, being dutiful about something, only to be terrorized by the appearance of a mouse. I sent my husband updates each day of the misery of setting new traps and cleaning full ones, warning him I might never recover from the whole ordeal.

He and his brother found my accounts very amusing, and my blog posts about the saga even funnier. And then, when he got home and assured me that after my horrible week of collecting more than twelve mice the invasion was over. He spent ten minutes convincing me to join him in the tv room so we could watch that show I'd started together. And I fell for it, I curled up in the chair, I let my guard down. And that's when a mouse popped out of the closet and ran under my chair again!

So, yesterday morning when I heard a noise in the window beside me, I assured myself **not** to overreact. *The Great Mouse Invasion* was years ago. In a different home. In fact, we'd never had a mouse in this house, at least not to our knowledge. A lizard, a possum, and a couple of birds nesting in the chimney, but not a mouse.

I could breathe, there was nothing to worry about. Until... the curtain moved. And I'm not talking a little move, I'm talking significantly enough that while working on the computer I saw the curtain move!

In my terror I stopped breathing, I stopped assuring myself, and did the first thing that came to mind. I sent a text to my husband. I mean, he was only in the kitchen but our house was "huge" and no one could ever hear you talking to them from another room. I've screamed in terror countless times to be told by the men-folk, "It's not that we don't care, it's just that we didn't hear you..."

Of course, being the loving husband that he is, and very used to my nervous disposition to sounds, and mistaking small bits of fuzz for mouse droppings, he came into the home library.

He stood in the doorway with that look that said, “Darling I love you, but this is getting out of hand!” He walked right up to the window, took a handful of that green curtain, and I screamed.

“Not until I’m out of this chair!!”

I grabbed my quilt, my open computer, and dashed into the hallway. In fairness, I have no idea why I grabbed either item. I just knew I’d managed a close escape with my life from whatever terror lurked behind that curtain. And, no matter what anyone else was thinking I was certain I knew what it was.

My husband smirked in amusement and shook his head. Look, I get it, and it was totally justified if you knew just how often I hear noises that turn out to be wild birds, random bits of music floating out of someone’s headphones, or anything else for that matter.

His attention back on the curtain, he pulled it back, ready to show me I could return to my chair and be calm. I could finish whatever project I was working on and not worry. But instead he said, “Oh, so there’s actually a mouse back here. I need a spade.”

My response was immediate. I ran up the hallway half-screaming, half-whining, “No, no, no, no, take it back! It can’t be. Stop trying to scare me like that!” I nearly tripped over a child sprawled on a mattress on the living room floor, and screamed, “SAVE YOURSELF!! GET OFF THE FLOOR!”

I climbed onto the back of the sofa and curled up wrapping the quilt of protection around myself. And when the teen rolled his eyes and asked what on earth I was overreacting to, *this time*. I whispered one tiny word, “Mouse.”

My husband, still having a stare down with the offensive little creature, was asking about that spade. The one I was not going to retrieve, because leaving my perch of safety would mean imminent death by the small rodent. Instead I demanded that the teen attempting to snooze on the floor go out to the strawberry patch and bring in the spade.

He pointed out I'd only complain about the dirt. I told him there was no time to argue about dirt when we had a mouse in the library. Not understanding the severity of the situation, he took forever to haul himself up off the floor and go in search of the spade. The one I said was in the strawberry patch. The only place he didn't look.

Thus, my husband took his eyes off that terrifying rodent and went out the door to help the aimlessly wandering teen while I was shouting after them, "Nooooo!!! You can't take your eyes off it!"

Alas, it didn't matter. The damage was done. Once the face-to-face stare down had ended, that crazy rodent escaped to safety. And despite the fact that the men-folk turned our library upside down looking for it, they couldn't find it.

The dreadful news was delivered to me in my new hiding spot. The shower stall, firmly closed, behind the bathroom door, also closed. Behind the bedroom door which was also shut.

"You can't hide in here forever," they told me.

I pointed out I had water, and they could bring me food from time to time. And then one of them had the gull to remind me of the slug who would climb up the shower drain every night. I'm not terrified of slugs, but I'm not exactly bffs with them either. Every night the slug is evicted, and somehow he, or his comrades, find their way back inside.

Eventually I was coaxed to return to the rest of the home, and by bedtime Mr (or Mrs) Mouse met their doom when they were lured out with peanut butter. I was assured I could sleep peacefully with no fear that the creature would suddenly grow over six feet tall and come lurking into the bedroom that night. I had nightmares anyway.

You'd think that would be the end of it though, wouldn't you? But it wasn't. Because there I sat, after much convincing and people showing me just how safe my rickety old library chair was. How nothing had happened to them. So I believed them.

I sat in the chair. I checked in on a few people to make sure they were surviving mandatory self-isolation without going insane. We checked with elderly friends to see if they needed a porch drop, and that's when it happened.

The noise. I didn't wait for the wriggle of the curtain. I simply got up and ran screaming through the house. My poor teens jumped a mile when I ran into the living room still screaming. They jumped up and ran out of the house ahead of me leaving me utterly alone.

My husband, taking a break from the endless cutting up of our old plum tree that hadn't survived a bad windstorm, came in to investigate the source of all the commotion. He found nothing behind the curtain, or under the chair. And to prove just how safe it was, he collapsed his weary body into my chair and spent the rest of the morning having a lovely chat with his mother.

As for my neighbors, they enjoyed the entire show, too, when, an hour later I was found running around the backyard screaming even louder. A very large something or other fell from a tree and moved the entire bush, while I was *under* it. I mean, maybe my theory was right and scary rodents really will grow over six foot and attack, right?

Wrong. Apparently the kids found the creepiest corner of the backyard to hide a gift for me in. They'd forgotten the horrors of yesterday. The frantic call to the hardware store for mouse traps and expanding foam to plug up holes behind the fireplace. They'd forgotten my running through the house screaming while they took flight with the dog.

They figured it would keep me busy, and distracted, as I hunted down the gift since it didn't include moving curtains or scary chairs in the sunny library.

It is one thing to make your own dog groan and bark when you're in fear, and quite another to set the neighbor's dog on edge. It is one thing to have your own teens look at you like you're insane, and quite another to look up and realize the teens next door are now leaning out their windows to see if anyone is really dying, and why that crazy American lady is running through her yard screaming, "Get it off me!" Again.

I may honestly never live this down.



Dear Reader,

While looking through some older scraps of writing I found this funny story. I'd shared a very shortened version of it on Facebook back in the lockdowns of 2020. I figured someday I'd look back on it and laugh, but in the meantime I had no qualms with friends and family laughing at my insanity.

The truth is, I am quite terrified of small rodents. As a teen I was half asleep once when one ran across me, and while I had a fond dislike of them prior to that, I was officially scarred for life thereafter.

We really did live in a beautiful home with a horrific insulation and rodent problem. It had no heating throughout it which made wintertime quite interesting. We were incredibly sad when we left that home behind, but I confess that I did not miss the mice problems that came with it.

To this day I've been known to bend down and closely inspect small bits of fuzz that catch my eye. You know, just to be sure they are fuzz and not evidence of a mouse. I still get twitchy if I hear weird sounds. There are places where I will kick cupboards before I open them- just in case.

Most recently I was emptying all the trash cans upstairs on my weekly rounds and emptied the one in my husband's office. I checked it to be sure all the scraps of paper had come out when I screamed and dropped the bin. As it turns out, lint, positioned just so in the bottom of a white bucket can also look like a mouse.

Knowing this silly fear that I have, it might come as a great surprise that a mouse plays a

crucial role in one of my stories. The word might be in the title, and I even have a felted {white, not gray} mouse on my writing desk which the mouse in my story is based off of. Kinda crazy considering my fear, isn't it?

*The Reluctant Author*

