

*The Edge of the Known World*

Mice. We had ‘em in spades. In our loft in Bucktown, when Susie and I first got married. City mice, not cute children’s book mice. Almost rats, big as scoops of ice cream and quick as an eyeblink. Quiet too. No squeaking. The only sound was the scratching of their teeth on our breadcrumbs and coffee beans. About 10:30 or 11 we’d hear them under the stove or behind the fridge and then soon enough we’d see them skittering along a baseboard or zipping over the counter. Horrible stuff. They navigated by smelling the piss trails from other mice and they dropped their tiny shit grains in every corner of the place. Plumped up with rabies, bubonic plague, hanta virus. Just horrible.

Our loft was small and the mice felt like live-in raiders. Susie’s painting stuff took up the corner and most of the plate glass window on the street side and half the wall on the other side—her easel and canvas rolls, stretcher bars, drop cloths, rags and brushes and paint buckets. The buckets were like gaping mouths on the floor—mouths with black and red interiors, and purple and green and blue. They made me think of portals like from a sci fi book, pits you could step into and get whisked away to different places where all was the color and shade of the dried paint lining the bucket you stepped in. But can you imagine? Dropping suddenly into a black world—no lights, no shadows. Voices maybe, but maybe they were just in your head, and no guarantees otherwise that you weren’t disastrously alone for all time. I tried to use one of the buckets to trap a mouse but a.) the thing was too fast and b.) Susie hollered at me.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Trying to capture the mouse.”

“Not with that.”

“Sure. I throw it over top of him, slide a piece of cardboard or something underneath, upend it, voila. A trapped mouse.”

“Give me that bucket back.”

Susie is a good painter. Back when we had the mice, she was very into abstract expressionism. I guess you’d say it heavily influenced her. That’s why, she told me, she used the buckets instead of more traditional stuff like a palette or oil tubes. She wasn’t Pollock-style-slinging paint down yet, chopping it off sticks and paint stirrers and all that. But in nervous little slashes she was scrubbing the paint into the canvas ruining brush after brush after brush. Shoving it into the micro-spaces between the fibers of the raw cotton duck—she’d stopped gesso-ing her canvases. That was cheating, she said, like selling out.

I wonder if Susie even cared we had the mice. She never helped me fight them. The first time we saw one, we were on the sofa, she with her head on my lap and we were watching some German movie where these angels guide people through Berlin but one of the angels falls in love with a circus performer he was supposed to be helping. Columbo was in it too. I don’t remember how it ended because about half-way through the movie, a mouse darted into the middle of the floor, sat back on his haunches just for a second, then disappeared into the shadows toward the kitchenette. We both screeched. Then Susie started laughing and I started cussing.

“Cut the damn movie off,” I said.

“Why?”

“Why? Because we have mice.”

“Just one.”

“I’ll squash it.” I tramped after it, figuring it was going for the trashcan.

“Come back to the couch,” she called.

“It dies,” I said, “Then we’re scouring every inch of this place.”

The next day I went to Home Depot and loaded up on anti-mouse stuff. I got glue traps and snap traps and poison peanut baits. When I got home, I heaved the fridge away from the wall and laid down some of the snappers baited with peanut butter, plus one of the poison peanut bait stations. I slid a few glue traps under the stove and put the rest at intervals along all the walls. In the bathroom behind the toilet went the final snapper. They’re such simple contraptions, a wire and a spring, a copper-colored pad with a dollop of something tasty. But pow! When those little clawed toes touch it, off with its head. When Susie got home from the art supply place, I showed her what I’d done.

“The poison is an anti-coagulant, the guy told me. They bleed to death internally.”

She looked at me. “Well, that’s horrific.”

“And with the glue traps, they die from, of all things, hypothermia. Can you believe that? You’d have thought starvation.”

“I wouldn’t have thought anything like that.”

“Of course the snap traps just lop their fuzzy little heads right off.”

“Don’t be sick, Josh,” she said to me, but I said, “I’m not being sick. I’m trying to stop us from getting sick. You know they eat shit, right? Like dog shit. They walk in it.

Then they come into our house.”

“That’s rats. This is just a mouse.” Susie’s voice was sad.

“Mice, Susie, plural.”

Susie had a big show open a week and a half after our mouse problem really bloomed. She had it at a little gallery near our loft. Little, but it had hosted a number of well-known artists in the past Susie told me. Her show even got a mention in *Time Out Chicago* and was recommended in the *Reader's Arts and Culture* section. One of the critics called her stuff an abstract expressionist “mini-revival.” Her parents came from down by Carbondale and lots of friends and people I didn't know, didn't even recognize. Susie wore this great black dress and black tights and she looked so slender and good. She held a wine glass and every now and then took little sips, perching her lips just so on the rim of the glass before barely tipping it, keeping her bright eyes fixed on whoever she was talking to. There was certainly no shortage of people who wanted to talk to her. She shook hands and hugged and kissed people on the cheek in a constant stream all night long.

About halfway through the show, I was standing and staring at one of her paintings, a big square of color that looked kind of like a sunset to me. She called it “The Edge of the Known World.” It had yellow whorls and slams of red and orange and down in one corner the deepest blue, applied in thick blobs over and over again—I remember her explaining to me how she did it—until it captured the light and seemed to hold it prisoner. I think it was my favorite thing she'd ever painted. Suddenly somebody was standing behind me, standing close, and I turned. It was a middle-aged man, skinny and tall, bespectacled, with a wiry mustache, slicked hair and a bowtie. He had on a seersucker suit and bowling shoes.

“Gorgeous,” he muttered.

“Me? Or the painting?” It was a joke. He was actually standing too close.

“Hm?”

“Me or,” and then I heard myself and said instead, “My wife did this.”

“Your wife?”

“Susie Brooks, the artist.”

This seemed to stun him. His head jerked back and a half smile appeared and disappeared on his thin, wet lips. He adjusted his glasses.

“You’re married to the artist?”

“I am.”

“How fortunate. Her work is absolutely stunning.” He reached toward, “The Edge of the Known World,” or reached out for it maybe, and traced the path of her brush strokes in the air inches from the surface, flaring his long fingers in tense bursts when they came to a plop or a splatter of color. It looked like he was directing music. “Such movement,” he finally said, but not to me. To the painting.

I said, “I’m pretty proud of her.”

This man turned and looked at me like I’d called his mother a garbage-eating prostitute. ‘Excuse me?’ his look said, ‘Excuse me?’ He forced the faintest of smiles through the skin of his face and turned back to the painting.

“I’m Josh. Brooks. Josh Brooks,” I said.

“Where does she work?” he said without looking at me.

“Not far from here, actually.”

“I’d very much like to visit her workspace while I’m in town.”

“Oh, you’re not from Chicago?”

“New York. Chelsea.”

“Her work space is our loft. We live there too.”

“Of course.” The man’s hand went to his face, fiddled with his mustache, and then he let out a breath, a kind of sigh. After a couple more seconds, he turned and walked away.

When the show was over, we hit a few bars with her friends, but I didn’t see my pal from “The Edge of the Known World.” Finally, we hailed a cab, but Susie wanted to walk a little, so I told the cabbie to let us out a block from home. The night was chilly and I threw my sport coat over Susie’s shoulders. The clops of our heels on the sidewalk were loud and hollow and my feet were killing me inside my dress shoes. The leather had never been broken in and my feet sweated and swam around in my dark socks. Blisters for sure. I was steering Susie with an arm around her waist. She was telling me in a loud voice how happy she was that so many people had come. We turned a corner toward our building and by then she was talking about modern day color theory—can you overlay white on white, for example, or black on black—and I said, “Sure, why not?” She gave me a look, the kind where her eyes get thin as razor blades.

I said, “That’s just because I believe you can do anything.”

“Well. I love you,” she said.

“I love you too.”

And then we were standing in front of our building.

“By the way, did you talk to a guy from New York tonight?” I said.

“What was his...what was his...who?” Her hands were on her head, fingers massaging her scalp.

“This guy, this dick actually. He was tall, real thin. Shitty mustache. Looked like he swiped his kicks from the Rock n’ Bowl.”

“Oh,” she laughed, “You must mean everybody. Besides you. And my parents.”

We went in. I sat her on the edge of our bed and slipped her shoes off. Her thin feet were damp in her tights. I squeezed her toes, something that always made her sleepy. Then I laid her down and she was asleep before I could kiss her cheek, so I tucked the comforter up around her shoulders, got my Maglite from my nightstand and went to check my mousetraps. None of the snap traps had been sprung. A few of the poison peanuts were gone. But. When I shined my light under the stove, there was one on a glue trap and it was still alive. I could see it kicking, just a fluttering of the tiny muscles in its leg, one of the back ones, the only leg that wasn’t on the trap. From the drawer by the sink, I grabbed a long handled wooden spoon and maneuvered it under the stove, struggling to keep my light on the mouse, until I managed to stick the spoon to the trap and slide it out.

The mouse was gray with a white belly and wide shining eyes, and there were several pieces of shit on the trap like black pieces of rice. When it saw me it struggled so much, these minuscule convulsions, I thought it was going to rip itself out of its limbs and plop onto the floor. Just a mouse body and head then, still alive, wriggling its way back under the stove. I held it up close, shining the light right in its black eyes.

“Fuck you,” I whispered and it nearly tore itself in half.

In our little utility closet in the kitchenette, next to the bin of potatoes, I kept a small toolbox. Tape measure, pliers, a hammer and other things. I got the hammer first, but thought that’d make too big of a mess and I didn’t feel like scraping mouse brains off

the linoleum. Instead, I got a Philips head, holding it by the shank, intending to knock the mouse behind the ears with the hard plastic handle, a quick hit, a broken neck. But with my arm cocked back, screwdriver in hand, I couldn't do it. Not that I didn't want the mouse dead, but I didn't want to have to feel it die. To touch its death.

I could fling it out into the middle of our building's back courtyard. Nature would take its course. The thing would be dead by morning. Maybe a stray cat would find it. Or I fill up a bucket with water and drop it in. Or just put it in the trashcan and close the lid and forget about it while it starved. I wondered if this mouse had eaten any of the poison peanuts. Maybe he was already dying. If he'd gotten ahold of one, actually consumed the whole peanut, it was supposed to take about twenty-four hours. I could slide him, trap and all, right back where he came from, then get him sometime tomorrow, dead, and throw the whole mess out. But how would I know if he ate a peanut or not? If I slid him back, he might just die anyway.

Meanwhile, the thing had started shivering. This was the hypothermia? Since the mouse's eyes were black, I couldn't tell what it was looking at. I could peel it off, I guess. Put on some gloves. How sticky are these traps? Vegetable oil might help.

But right then there was a scurrying by my feet, the scrabble of tiny claws—scritch scritch scratch. I flicked the flashlight beam down. Four of them, then five, maybe six with whips for tails as long as their bodies. Standing up on their hind feet a couple of them, reaching out with their front claws and swatting at the beam. Watchers. I flinched, I'll admit it, heart leaping up to my Adam's apple. They were seeping into my house, one after another after another, like a micro army. I tripped back, losing the flashlight and the glue trap with the mouse, the light banging on the floor and blinking out, leaving me in



the dark with that awful brood. I hissed through my teeth and stamped my feet to scare them back and stepped forward in the dark, kicking toward the animals. My foot came down with a quick popping sound on a lump. I groped for the light switch, flipped it on and saw that all of the mice were gone. Disappeared. The glue trap was mouse-side down, my mouse crushed, with little scribbles of red guts on either side of the trap.

When Susie finally got up in the morning, it was all cleaned up. I'd scooped the trap and mouse into a trash bag and then put that bag into another bag and chucked it all into the can in the alley. I poured bleach directly onto the mouse's blood, then filled up the mop bucket with bleach water and did the entire kitchenette floor, spreading it to all the corners and letting it slosh under the fridge and especially under the stove. I'd let it dry then got the Lysol and did it all again, covering up the bleach smell with Mountain Breeze. When that dried, I threw out the mop and bucket. Finally, I got the 409 bottle and sprayed it on all the counters until it puddled, wiping it up and then 409-ing it all again, this time letting it sit and air dry. We kept a tub of disinfectant wipes under the sink, and I used them all up wiping down the fridge and stovetop, and even all the knives in the knife block, the toaster, the coffee maker, and especially the microwave. For that, I got the 409 back out and went over every inch of it, inside and out, on top and underneath, until it was brand-new clean. When I finished the sun was up.

Right there in the kitchenette, I stripped down and threw away everything I was wearing. I realized I'd never changed out of my clothes from Susie's show—I'd cleaned in my dress clothes. It all went out—tie, button down, slacks, socks and dress shoes. Good riddance to those. They were mottled with pale spots from the bleach anyway. I

tiptoed naked to the shower and scrubbed myself for a half hour straight. Susie came into the bathroom while I was toweling off.

“It smells like a chemical factory out there,” she said.

“Sorry. I cleaned. After you went to bed, I saw a few more mice.”

“It’s not like I don’t already have a pounding headache.” She sat on the toilet with her head in her hands and her hair drooped off her forehead like curtains for her face.

“I’ll air it out.”

When she came out of the shower, I was on the sofa fooling with the cable remote. She was naked with just a towel in a turban wrapping up her hair.

“I love that you love to be naked.” I smiled big.

“Last night, did you say something to me about somebody from New York? I seem to remember you saying something about somebody from New York.”

Bowling shoes. “An admirer of yours. Too bad he was a dick.”

“They’re all dicks.” She walked over to her painting stuff and put her hands on her hips. She shifted her weight to one leg, the way she stood when she was thinking seriously, and when she was naked standing that way, it made her ass perk up. Hello, I thought.

“Unfortunately, they’re necessary dicks,” she said.

“Necessary dicks?”

“Did he say, like, where he was from or anything?”

“Just New York. Wait, Chelsea too.”

She turned. “Was he a gallery owner?”

“He didn’t say,” I said, then, “He said he wanted to see your workspace. Like, come over. To our house.”

“What?”

“I guess he wanted to come over.”

“Please tell me you took his phone number.”

“No,” I said, “I told you he was a dick.”

“Josh.”

“He didn’t have the time of day for me.”

“Josh. He was probably a gallery owner. In New York.”

I looked at her in the sunlight coming into the loft, silver beads of water on her shoulders, her perfectly round breasts, her smooth-skinned stomach—I loved to run the flat of my hand over it—hips, calves, ankles.

“Josh, why didn’t you get his number? Or why didn’t you bring him over to me? Introduce us?”

“I figured you met him probably.”

“Well, maybe. But you do realize I talked to a zillion people last night and I was nervous and tipsy?”

“I know.”

She glared at me, crossed her arms over her wet, bare breasts, and said, “I need, *need* to talk to dicks like that. I need it, Josh. Need it.”

“Why?”

“Oh, I don’t know. So I can have a career? That I’ve wanted since kindergarten?”

“Susie—” I started.

“Do you even care what happens with my career?”

“Of course I care. What does that mean?”

“Hopefully he’ll look me up. Hopefully he took a postcard and thinks about the show and sees the website and decides to email me.” She turned, saying more, but I couldn’t make it out, only the tone, the timbre of her voice.

“You wouldn’t have wanted him to come over anyway,” I shouted after her, “Mice, remember?”

She said she was going out and after she got dressed she did, but she didn’t say to where. I tried to sit, just sit, and watch some TV but I couldn’t. I kept thinking about the mouse army from the night before, those tiny marauders from hell, teensy demons sent by the devil to destroy my house. I jumped up and checked my traps, moved the stove and fridge and, seeing nothing for now, scooted them back, washed my hands, and sat back down. Ha. Remember that game Mousetrap? Basically a Rube Goldberg machine for kids. I don’t remember exactly how it worked. I remember one of the pieces—It had a lot of pieces. Took forever to set up—was an orange or maybe a red plastic man. I think he was supposed to be a diver. And then this thing that looked like an upturned laundry basket slid down this notched pole and landed on him. Or, no, that was supposed to come down on the mouse. Duh. “Mousetrap.” I can’t remember what the mouse looked like though. Green? Blue? Susie’s good with kitsch. I’ll have to ask her when she gets back.