

Mousetrap

The door to the basement had been replaced when it was remodeled, shortly before I began working there, and looked like a sliding farm door but wasn't. The narrow staircase that led down to the basement looked like it had been chipped away from stone with a pickaxe, like the naturally eroded entrance to a cave. It became 20 degrees colder as soon as you opened the door, and you had to slump down to avoid hitting your head on lumpy stone that made up the ceiling. All along the left side of the staircase were stacks of dusty beer boxes, and at the bottom was a mountain of full cases of liquor.

My system at work was to start with mixed drinks around 7pm but never take shots before 11:00. In my early twenties I worked at a bar called Sidewalk Cafe in New York, conveniently located one block from my apartment. The benefit of a short commute, other than saving on train fare, was that my chances of falling more than once on the walk home considerably decreased, which was nice.

En route to work I'd pass a pharmacy, a 24-hour falafel shop, and a hookah bar. Sidewalk spanned the corner of 6th street and Avenue A, a bar on one side and a restaurant on the other. Its burgundy awning needed to be rolled out each morning with a hand crank and hung over the outdoor metal tables and chairs. Pitiful trees speckled the block, twiggy and short, providing the illusion of nature for hungover brunchers hiding from the morning sun behind giant black sunglasses and pitchers of mimosas.

One night, pre-shooters but mid tequila sodas, I had to go into the basement. I do not remember what for, but I know I was carrying stuff. I crouched down to take a step or two in, when I was startled by a noise. It was a squeak, but not like a sneaker or a mattress spring. It

was organic, and there was urgency in it. It persisted as I descended, causing enough alarm that I stopped and put down whatever I was holding. I hunted around for the squeaky source like a game of Marco Polo—and the further into the basement I moved, the quieter it got. So, I tiptoed backwards, creeping up the steps, hunched over with arms bent like a cat burglar.

Had I kept walking forward and turned left at the stairs, I'd be face to face with the giant silver door of the walk-in cooler, the haven that stored all the cold beer bottles and full kegs. Around the corner, behind the walk-in, was a cobwebby graveyard of unused signage and splintery planks of wood. Among the rubbish stood empty kegs, waiting to be drug over to the base of the stairs and picked up by the next delivery driver.

Most nights, the end of my shift was not as simple as leaving the building when my job was done. By the time the doors locked behind the last patron, most of us on staff were far beyond the legal limit. Bars close at four in New York but if you work at one, you know that's not quitting time. It's time to slap post-it's over the cameras and turn the music up as loud as it goes. One of us manned the bar while the rest of us sat in booths meant for brunching and rolled each other joints. At some point, someone discovered that dusty corner of carcass kegs and realized that if we moved enough of them into a circle, we could use them like seats and hide there from the cameras until the sun kissed the skyline. When the neon sign clicked off and our glasses were full, we ceremoniously trailed down to the basement to take a seat in our keg circle and indulge in various plants, pills, and powders until the conversations turned to absolute mush.

Back in the chilly basement, I stepped back up onto another step and saw where the noise was coming from. A flat white rectangle, just smaller than an index card, laying there in

the corner of the stair. Spread across the rectangle was a pollen-colored, waxy looking substance, and stuck smack in the middle of the slime, was a mouse. My heart jumped the way that it does when crawlly things cross my path, but I still crouched down low and leaned in closer to get a better look. He was squeaking, crying really, and pulling his body fiercely and rhythmically over and over away from the trap. His four feet were stuck firmly in the glue, and as he pulled, his tiny back rounded like a hissing cat and his pine needle legs stretched. Lodged in the glue were some bits of grey furry fuzz, like leaves fallen from a tree in a violent storm. He was a baby.

When I used to drink, I had this habit of never admitting to anyone, myself included, that I was intoxicated. I have let drool fall from my chin, been caught peeing in a mop closet, and been awakened with smelling salts after falling asleep on a bar to assure those around me that *I'm fine, just pour me another*. This night was no different. I'm sure I drank more than I remember, and I know I wouldn't have admitted it. But I do have clear memories of this experience, and how it felt to be there. I can say that the immediate emotional bond I felt to that mouse probably stemmed more from imbibing than from my compassion for rodents, but in the moment, it felt acutely real.

My heart, now, was racing. The baby's squeals persisted, and every one sent cold panic through me. His safety was now my priority. I ducked back upstairs to find help. My boss at the time was a general manager named Liam. He stood at 5'5", maybe 5'6", and had the scruffy, high pitched voice of Charlie Day. He was a happy little guy most of the time, aware of our antics and a fan of the perfunctory scolding. He ordered Milk Bar cookies for staff birthdays and once got caught going down on a waitress in his office, so, a real team player. Liam was doing

something manager-y in his Mickey-Mouse-if-he-smoked-a-pack-a-day voice, and I bum-rushed him with my dilemma. He looked at me with doubt, concern, maybe pity. I don't remember what he said to me other than "Do not free that mouse, Kathleen, it will just keep coming back." My respect for his instructions maxed out around polishing glassware so there was no danger of me following this order.

I learned later that glue traps are the least humane way to catch mice, but they are the cheapest. The mice don't die fast with a snap of the neck like in spring traps or sit quietly in little wooden boxes until they are set free like with catch and release (although I've heard horror stories of people forgetting to check those for days, causing trapped mice to eat each other alive). A mouse steps onto a glue trap, one foot at a time, until they are stuck completely. Then, they panic, and exhaust themselves trying to break free. After realizing they can't pull themselves loose, they will start chewing their legs off for freedom. If they can't find the will or the stamina to complete this task, or if they don't die from their injuries, they starve to death. In someone's shitty basement.

I grabbed my phone from behind the bar and began searching for ways to free my new ward. What was happening to the rest of the bar while I did this? I have no idea. My job, as it so often did, took a backseat to my adventures. The best method of action I could find in my liquor flavored haze required a box, its lid, and some cooking oil. I pestered the men in the kitchen for a plastic ramekin full of olive oil, refusing to answer their questions as to why. I hustled into the basement, shutting the door behind me, and bent down to place the oil delicately next to my friend. I scurried down the rest of the stairs and picked through the piles of discarded cardboard until I found a box that was the right size and still had its lid.

My life up until this point didn't look as glamorous as I'd hoped it would. I had dropped out of college twice and lived in a studio apartment with an angry boyfriend. I trapped myself in cycles, creating a new reality every three years or so, just around the time the previous one caught fire. I moved apartments, or cities, or states. I changed friend groups and drug preferences and favorite bands. Sidewalk Café was the beginning of a cycle that came after being fired from a taqueria uptown who accused me of giving free drinks to my friends. These were the last years I'd spend in New York for a while, only a hop skip and jump from everything crashing down around me in a seemingly irreversible way. I would eventually run out of new beginnings, but not yet. I was still stuck.

The website on my phone told me to place the entire trap inside of my open cardboard box. I sat on the steps and felt my hands shake as I reached out for the glue trap. I'd never touched a mouse, or a mousetrap, and suddenly didn't want to. But I was in too deep. He needed me. I pinched the corner of the trap with two fingers and slowly dragged it closer to me. When I moved him, the mouse perked up. His squeaks became screeches and his yanks intensified. I remember picking up the rectangle by its sides, touching as little of it as possible, trembling at the thought of this mouse jumping free and tearing my face to shreds. I dropped it into the cardboard box and instantly felt like a hero.

Since I can remember, I've had vivid dreams. Sometimes color, sometimes black and white. I am never watching myself like in a movie, I'm always experiencing them from my own viewpoint, like real life. It's not real life, though, because a dead family member is alive or I'm retaking high school gym for the eleventh time. Around this age, I started to have a recurring dream that my teeth were falling out. Not just falling out, *crumbling into my mouth*. Sometimes

a whole tooth fell out and I spit it into my hand, but usually bits of enamel freed themselves from my gums and I had to fight not to swallow them. I would nervously run my tongue along the inside of my teeth to feel which ones were missing, where the gaps were, but I could never find the holes. I hated these dreams because they were disturbing enough to wake me up, and I never wanted wake up, so I needed them to stop. I researched a bit to uncover what problem, presumably dental, was at the root of my unrest. And I discovered that the cause could be several things, but none of them chomper related. Depression, stress, poor health, *feeling out of control.*

I sat on the stair with my feet and knees together in front of me, creating a table with my thighs. I placed the mouse box in my lap and balanced it while I reached over to pick up my cup of oil. I crouched over the box, as close as my fear would let me, and tried to hold the cup directly above the mouse. Should I pour a lot? A little? What if this traumatizes him? What if he drowns? I noticed then that his front right paw was bent in an unnatural way. His fingers splayed out to the right, father than they should, and his toothpick leg, while still attached to the foot and shoulder, looked frayed at the wrist like the split end of an untrimmed hair. He was entering phase two. His legs would soon snap and even if he got free, he'd be footless. I had to act fast.

I dumped half of the oil on the mouse. It plopped onto his head exactly like you'd think it would, a cartoon splash. He continued pulling but to no avail. It didn't work. I moved my hand farther inside the box, braver now, more determined. I dripped the oil in quick circles around his body, hoping to drench his feet, praying I would watch them break free.

His fur was slick. The oil drenched him, his hair now clinging to his skin like a small child fresh out of the pool. You don't know how small a baby mouse is until it's wet. He could've run circles in my palm, littler than half my thumb. It's amazing all his organs fit inside. I watched my little hero pull and wrestle his body around the trap. I peered at his almost broken leg, willing it to stay intact while he struggled. *Hang on, buddy, I thought, you can do it.* Suddenly, one foot free. Then another. His toes were eyelashes, so wispy and small. He shook each foot when he freed it, releasing the oil and I'm sure the cramps. Three feet free, then four. I swiped the glue trap out from under him with one hand and shut the box tight with the other, leaving him racing back and forth, bumping into the walls of his now slightly larger prison.

That flood of endorphins rivaled any high I've ever had. I held in my arms living breathing evidence of my ability to change the trajectory of the future. In this box was proof that I was in control, that I was capable, that I could save a life.

I hurried upstairs, a miracle worker, ready to release my vermin pal back into the wild. I shoved past patrons in the dining room and pushed open the side door. The cool night air smacked me awake. I took a few steps away from the building to find a tree planted in the sidewalk. It was a pitiful tree, a straggly thing maybe four feet tall, surrounded by mulch and stabbed into the concrete to make tourists feel better about the air quality. Certainly, this was the place. I got on my knees at the base of the tree and placed the box on the ground. I leaned forward on my palms so that my elbows almost touched the earth and tilted the box gently toward the tree. What did people think about this display? Who knows? That mouse and I were the only thing on that street, this sapling our burning bush.

I peeled away the lid from the bottom of the box, cracking it open like a baby chick's egg. I expected to have to coax this mouse out from his shelter, considering the comfortable home I'd made him and the bond we'd forged. Instead, before I gave him more than an inch, he flung himself out into the world like a windup toy, spinning and scuttling along the sidewalk in a serpentine pattern until he reached the soft safety of the mulch. I watched him there, with all four feet, his wet body heaving with fear and relief.

I sat there for a while, considering my new role as Saver of Mice, Protector of the Innocent. Eventually I'd duck back behind the bar and resume my position. I'd pick up foamy pint glasses with both hands and shoved them in warm soapy sinks. I'd slide the bottle opener from my back pocket and pop rows of jagged metal discs from the tops of bottles. I'd look around me at the customers, sloppy and hanging from each other's necks, yelling advice, and declaring their love for each other. But for now, I stared at my mouse, his shaky little body and his second chance at life. I thought about how, despite its ineffectiveness, he pulled and pulled, yanking himself to the point of maiming. How close he came to dying, how bad that death would have been. I realized that at some point he would get hungry. And because his options were limited, he'd likely travel the same path to the same hole in the same basement wall. There, he might find food, but he also might wind up stuck in the same toxic mess. Not because he didn't want to live, but because it was all he knew. It was all he had. I thought of myself, of my tequila, of my teeth. *It will just keep coming back.*