

I hate a mouse. Always have, always will. Nasty things get in your attic and breed, leave pellets all over the house. I've heard they will nibble your fingers while you sleep. And need I mention the bubonic plague? Mind, I would not have them or any or any other animal suffer unduly. That's why Vera and I use only the spring type trap. Banana scented glue boards? No thank you. How would you like to die glued to your lunch? And I won't even go into how the poison does them in. Ask me, clean snap of the neck is the kindest thing. Now, one of life's little surprises is that I would attend a funeral service for a mouse.

Bless Vera's heart, she wants me active in my retirement years. So what happens that first week when I take a six pack and fire up the tube for a little pro ball, and Vera walks in and sees me there on the Stratolounger? "Noble," she says, unplugging the set, "get in the car." She pours my Old Milwaukee down the drain, and the next thing I know I'm standing in a True Value holding a shovel and a hoe while Vera writes the check.

Back home, "Pumpkin, it's September," I say to Vera in the corner of the yard where she wants a garden. "Your timing's shot to hell," I say.

"It's your sixty-fifth September is what it is," she says. "You think for one minute about poor old Morgan kicking it for sheer uselessness at sixty-nine, then tell me *timing*. You've heard of fall gardens, haven't you? You eat turnips, don't you? Broccoli? Cauliflower?" she says. "Rutabagas."

Which is only for starters. Over the next few months, we paint the house, change the wallpaper, add shrubbery to the front lawn, so while the rest of the neighborhood goes more and more rental and so need I say to the dogs, we're beginning to look like something out of a TV ad for the Republican Party.

Vera reads to me from a magazine article called "Our Forefathers, Ourselves," by P. Harrison Goldigger, Ed.D.: "The sense of self that derives from a familiarity with one's ancestral heritage is essential to the holistic well-being of the American otherwise awash in the currents of a contemporary culture of fleeting fashion." We take a night class in genealogy at the community college in tracing our family tree. We do a little research, and I figure, Lord help a sense of self that derives from horse thieving, moonshining, and the slave trade.

One morning I'm on the roof cleaning out rain gutters, when I see something you don't see every day. It's December, cold and bright, and our neighbor of only a couple of months, a fat man with artificial legs, sits in the middle of his back yard, wearing only swimming trunks and apparently talking to a tree. Then I see that what he's really talking to is a squirrel, which after a few minutes, he coaxes to come down and actually take something from his hand. Vera and I have wondered about a little boy who stays over there on sort of an off-and-on basis. We've seen different people bring him, and a week or so later, someone comes to get him. I come up with a joke about the fat man's being a little squirrely and not all there and make a mental note to use it when I tell Vera.

One day after I've spent all morning hanging martin houses all over the yard, knowing perfectly well they'll be full of sparrows inside a week, Vera says she has a surprise. I tell her I don't want a surprise, I want a nap. We drive across town to a house where this woman about four hundred years old sits coughing and smoking a cigarette on the front porch. Vera introduces herself as the one who called about the car. The woman kind of wheezes something and points the way around the side of the house.

In the back yard, there is a nineteen fifty-seven Ford which I have seen modern art sculpture look better than. "You were saying how it takes a room full of computers to work on the cars today," Vera says. "I thought, here's just the thing to fiddle with in your spare time."

Instead of saying anything at first, I make a show out of running my hand over the hood before lifting it and pretending to be interested in the engine. I look at Vera and kick a flat tire. Then I walk over to where my wife stands, rubbing my chin and looking at the ground. "Well, I'll tell you, Vera," I say. "Truth is, a large block of concrete would sooner provide transportation." This is maybe not the time for sarcasm, but sometimes you surprise yourself at what you will say, and then keep saying, knowing the damage you're

doing. "Sweetheart," I say, "a stick of dynamite could improve this automobile."

Vera goes back to our car. I follow, thanking the old woman on the porch. I know I should apologize, but it's like there's this little part of you that is evil and cruel, and it comes out just when you've about forgotten it's there. "I'd like to know what you had in mind in the way of spare time," I say. "Maybe you were thinking of the breathing spells between finding our roots and trying to have House Beautiful in a neighborhood that's in a nose dive, where we don't know a soul anymore and probably should have left when there was still any property value to speak of."

Vera is crying, and I am wondering how it will be possible to go home. I have this vision of Vera and me playing bingo in Saint Petersburg, and I want to cry myself.

"Vera, honey, do you want a dog?" I say. I am worried. For days, my wife has been reading Scripture and sorting through old belongings.

"Remember the last one," she says. The year we were married and found out we couldn't have children, we got a dog instead that barked all night, shat in the floor furnace, bit my mother, and then disappeared, all within a week.

"That was forty years ago," I say. "I think dogs are different now." Vera doesn't say anything. She just stares at an old pair of high heels she's holding and then tosses them onto a pile for the Goodwill Industries. "It's just a thought," I say.

One morning Vera decides to stay in bed, says she may have pulled a muscle in her back and wants a day off her feet. I bring her breakfast and some photo albums she asks for. I have my own breakfast in the kitchen, where I also map out plans for a spring garden, thinking maybe seeing something grow will help Vera to feel better. Then I run to the store for a carton of milk and a *McCall's*. Back home I turn on the television and flick around from one game show to another for about two minutes before turning off the set. Then, maybe we'll take a trip, I think. Maybe Vera would like to see the Grand Canyon, or we could look into one of those tour groups. I close my eyes. Maybe we could just get away for a while.

The door bell wakes me from a little cat nap. I go to the door, and there's my fat neighbor leaning on a cane and smiling. "Name's Homer D. Brown," he says. "Go by Homer D."

"Noble Smith," I say. I shake his hand, being careful not to push

or pull in any direction. "You're our neighbor," I say. "Come in."

He does this mechanical waddle into the living room and sits. I keep my eyes above his shoulders until he taps his artificial knee with the cane a few times. "Long story there," he says and sort of chuckles. "Has to do with three women, one irate real estate agent, and a high velocity tour of the Mojave Desert. Aircraft were involved," he says. "Remind me to tell you about it sometime."

"I will, Homer D.," I say.

He looks around at the living room. "Well, you have certainly done wonders with this place. It's a genuine inspiration is what it is," he says. I've about decided he's just come to chat, when his expression goes serious. "Noble," he says, "I've been meaning to pay a visit anyway, but the fact is we've got a little problem now, and I need to ask you for a favor." Here it comes, I think. God knows what I'm in for with this character. "Concerns my little pal over there," he says. "You may have seen him. Sort of a semi-relative. Parents aren't much good, and he stays mainly with me now. Great little kid. He's about five and a half." He stops talking for a few seconds and just stares at the floor, like somewhere down there is the bottom line. "Noble, he had this pet mouse that meant the world to him. Named it Sir. Can you beat that for a handle?" He laughs. Homer D., I think. "Well, Sir died sometime last night."

"I'm awfully sorry," I say, and I'm thinking, give the kid a cockroach. Ought to cheer him right up. What has this got to do with me?"

"Our problem is here," he says, slapping his legs. "These here prosthetic devices are true technological miracles. They will perform for me most functions that yours yourself serve. However, digging graves is not one of them. Of course, having the boy do it is out of the question."

"You want me to bury the mouse," I say.

"A near bull's eye," he says. "Just dig a hole—the rest I can handle. Take you all of thirty seconds."

"I'll meet you in your back yard in five minutes," I say.

I go back to the bedroom to change shoes and tell Vera the whole story, thinking maybe she'll get a kick out of it. Instead, her brow goes all tense, and she listens like I'm pointing a gun at my head as I speak. "That precious little boy," she says. I am on my way out the door when Vera says, "Noble, wait." She rubs the sheet between her fingers and says nothing for a minute. Then, "Noble, let's have a service," she says. "A memorial service for the little mouse. You could say a few words."

"You want me to eulogize a rat?" I say. "Are you out of your mind?"

"We could dress up," she says. "Then after the burial, have snacks over here. A little reception for the boy. I'm going to call the man now and see what he thinks. What's his name?"

I tell her, and she is out of bed and on the phone faster than you can say Jack Robinson. It's obvious from her side of the conversation that Homer D. thinks the idea is wonderful, and that I might as well put on a suit.

I can see what's coming. If I know Vera, that kid will always be over here getting into everything, trampling the garden, asking a zillion questions. Vera will have me making kites, throwing baseballs, hanging around in toy stores at Christmas, and together they are going to drive me to distraction. 🐭