

Mice and Men

by Gary Moshimer

Some life in Rosco's walls. He listened with his dead wife Sonya's stethoscope: rustles and scratching, a collective heartbeat.

"Vermin", said Vlad, Rosco's neighbor. "Will take over if no kill."
He smiled with one tooth, urped some vodka.

"I hate to kill."

"Be a man."

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Rosco collected mousetraps, peanut butter. He lay awake hearing the clacking down the line, dominoes of death. Some didn't die and he finished them with a tiny hammer. He cried.

Finally there was silence in the house, and inside Rosco as well. He wanted to be with Sonya.

The only implements of death in the house were steak knives. He pressed a point between his ribs but it hurt too much. He had no rope. He yanked his clock radio into the tub but the circuit blew. He stepped in front of a van but the driver was a stunt man who screeched and spun circles around Rosco, leaving him shaken but fine. In the back of the van, an upside down man in a wheelchair cursed.

Days later Rosco dove to the sidewalk from his roof, but laughable coincidence landed him in the lap of the mending wheelchair man.

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He needed sympathy, and he needed it now!

He made up a sure fire disease — pancreatic cancer. He took it down to Murphy's, spun it on a bar stool, soaked in advice from drunks and bartenders.

"Live life to the fullest!"

"Get to know Jesus!"

"Kiss your ass goodbye!"

He made his final plans, pyre and tasteful urn.

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He ate only applesauce to lose the weight. When his bones surfaced he wobbled into Murphy's for full effect. His high school love was there! Olivia! He literally fell into her arms.

He took her in: transparent hair and skin, eyes the bleak color of impatient sky waiting for any cloud, silver-lined or black. Her arms, like blown glass anomalies, kneaded him.

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She moved in to nurse him, and he filled out, his terrible lie pressing from the inside. "I'm getting better," he said.

"Shhhh. We need to get your last portrait."

She took him to her studio, their hands brushing over the mouse, furiously clicking the final edit for the wake.

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She was sick, opening mouth over toilet to stream oatmeal. "I would like a pickle," she said, and off Rosco went, the new spring in his step launching him before the van, which this time sped up, the wheelchair man just learning the complicated levers. Rosco heard the clack of the death trap, but felt nothing.

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Olivia was happy he'd prearranged. Her long fingers centered the portrait on the easel.

In the big silent house she polished the urn. She found the stethoscope and slid it to her chest, then away from the sad plunking notes to her belly, where the movements, random and secret, coalesced to a steady beat.

