

Diptych for Saint Gertrude of Nivelles, Protectoress Against Mice, Rats, and Mental Illness

by Jacquelyn Bengfort

I. Trappings

Her husband was no help. She bought traps and waited days for him to bait and set them. He was funny about certain things in this way--he always said a prayer when dropping a basket of live crabs into the steaming pot.

"Killing things falls in your wheelhouse," she'd told him, without effect. He only made fun of her--the little feminist who couldn't. Finally they struck a deal: she would catch the mice, she would clean the disease-laden crap from the cupboards and block the holes in the back wall with steel wool, if only he would dispose of the tiny carcasses.

So she set about eliminating the problem, all the time recalling some newsmagazine program she'd seen as a child: a discussion of hantavirus, nasty and deadly and spread by mice. The discovery of the pests had destroyed her peace of mind as well as her delight with the Victorian rowhouse they'd purchased at a price that made the mortgage a monthly struggle. At night, lying in bed and unable to sleep, straining to hear the clack of traps snapping to in the kitchen, she would read the CDC statistics concerning rodent-borne illnesses on her smartphone. Not many people fell ill--maybe a few dozen per year--but of those who did, maybe forty percent died. She

found a stark sort of poetry of loss in those figures.

She also read up on all the ways people battled infestation. Once, she found a site that purported to advocate for live trapping and release but really seemed to advocate for no trapping at all.

"Did you know," it said, "that mice are ever so intelligent?"

"Did you know," it said, "that baby mice in their nests sing for their mother whenever she is gone?"

"It's only that we cannot hear it," it continued, "their cries being out of our range."

In the spring she discovered she was pregnant. She redoubled her efforts, determined the mice be gone before the baby arrived that winter. She hadn't yet told her husband. She experimented with exotic baits--smears of chocolate, pastes of flour and bacon fat. She obsessively emptied closets and pulled out furniture on the first two floors, vacuuming up the tiny oblongs of scat from every unlikely place, a flu mask pulled over her nose and mouth.

On a rainy day in May, as she dabbed a bit of peanut butter on the yellow pedal of a trap, she felt her stomach clench. She sat heavily on the tile, placing the loaded trap on the floor beside her.

She seemed to be shrinking.

As the cupboards loomed over her, lurching with the violence of her diminution, a sound like wordless angels filled her head. A plaintive chorus--a crying of several small things together, mournful and pleading and hungry and dying somewhere behind the cupboards, waiting on a mother never to return.

Her clothes turned gray, turned to fur. She saw the length of thin flesh sprouted behind her, felt her hands turn to paws that scrabbled under her.

Over the screaming of the baby mice, she heard the garage door opening. Surely he could help this once, could undo whatever had happened to her? She ran, blind with fear, her tiny body foundering and clumsy with newness and unfamiliarity, toward the back door.

Forgetting the trap that lay in her path.

The spring-loaded metal bar closed down on her head, shattering her skull like a nutcracker crushes a hazelnut shell.

Her husband opened the door, deactivated the alarm, and noticed the little corpse laying partially obscured under a trap that had flipped as it closed on her. "Oh honey, you caught one," he called to the empty house, pulling a plastic newspaper bag over his hand as he bent to dispose of the mouse.

II. I Thought We Could Be Happy Here

Find a way in. It's the first step. It's easy. A crack, a loosely-fit pipe. A hole no larger than a dime. If I can fit my whiskers, the rest of me will follow, even heavy as I am with pups.

This house beckoned--I could smell the scent of a compost bucket, the trash can, a bag of dog food stored under the sink. So much to eat given we can live off bare crumbs.

Lots of fluff about. Lots of space to run behind the cupboards. I made a nest. I thought we could be happy here.

The pups came, and grew. They sang to me when I left to forage. Always plenty to eat. The people who live here--they are generous. "Leave the dishes 'til morning," I always hear them tell one another. It's a great blessing to us.

But then--one of them saw me. Her shriek scared even the pups for a second, interrupting their song. I glanced back before diving into

the oven control panel, to descend by way of wires to my children, my home. I saw her eyes. Panic, and worse: a determination. Recognition. We are at war.

War is full of waiting. And so there was a lull. Fewer crumbs, but we survived, though the pups were hardly that anymore. They'd begun to forage for themselves, in ever larger loops away from the nest.

I warned them. Be wary. Be cautious. I am an old mouse. You don't get this old by running blindly at every delicious odor you smell.

It did no good.

I left the house one day, to scout some new place we might go, a secret place where the humans had no murder in their eyes. Upon my return the smell of peanut butter hung in the air, and I knew it was too late.

My children. My children. All my pups. She had trapped them, snapped them, every one.

Anger ripped through me, an anger too great for the body I had. It inflated me. I stretched, flesh straining flesh, until the pain threw a merciful blackness over my sight.

I awoke to the sound of a key in a lock, the tile of the floor cold against my unfamiliar, nearly hairless body. The dog found me first, barking as I huddled against the corner cupboard.

The woman came in next. "Who are you?" she demanded. I could smell her fear, different from that which I was wont to foment in her, but no less pungent.

I opened my mouth to speak, but words hadn't come in the bargain with this human body. So instead I stood and pulled a heavy knife

from the block while she gaped, standing herself as if stuck fast to the floor.

