

Side Effects

by Melanie Yarbrough

When the medicine started to interrupt her sleep, she made elaborate breakfasts — sweet potato pancakes, crepes with homemade cream cheese filling, omelets with spinach and brie, hand-rolled croissants stuffed with bittersweet chocolate. It was in those early hours of cooking that she first heard the mice. She was bent over, her head in the pantry, licking her pinky to determine which canister held the sugar and which the salt. She heard scratching and stood there in that stooped position, finger still in her mouth, listening.

She piled plates high with food, put out all kinds of blankets and pillows for them to lay on. It didn't feel like a living room but a room made of cushy things, a room whose sharp edges had been removed.

Come eat. She flipped on the light in her daughters' room, and they stirred. They laughed when she did and raced to the living room.

Her husband, groggy, poured himself a cup of coffee and joined them, kissed each of his girls on the forehead before settling on the floor, his back against the couch. They watched cartoons and dozed until it was time to get ready for school.

Eventually, though, the girls no longer got out of bed when she called them. They just wanted their cereal back, she guessed, wanted to wake up in the daylight. She could not blame them.

Do you hear that? she said to her husband one morning.

He rolled over and blinked at her.

Listen! she whispered.

I don't hear anything, he said, putting his face into her arm.

They're in the walls, she said, but he'd already fallen back to sleep. She followed the sound with her eyes even though she couldn't see anything in the dark or through the walls. She could not

just lay there as the mice got braver, louder. *I'm going for a run*, she whispered to her husband.

It came without warning, save the doctor mentioning that the medicine caused dehydration and nausea. She threw up orange juice and toast onto the Jordans' mailbox. She used her shirt to wipe up the mess and walked home in her sports bra, teeth chattering, the smell of her bile-soaked shirt making her sick.

Her husband was gone at work all day and with the girls at school, she began making her way through the books she'd accumulated since college. *Finally*, she thought, *I can finish all of the reading I've always planned to do*.

She lost track of which books she read; some days she got fifty pages in before she realized she'd read it already. The medicine muddled most things and everything felt vaguely familiar, so she kept lists of the titles as she finished them. She added synopses to the lists, full character sketches and family trees until it was a task all its own trying to figure out what stories she knew and which she didn't.

She took to dusting the books instead, reveling in not needing to make a list of which ones she'd dusted. Watching the specks fly in front of her, she raced them to the next stack, brushing them away before they could settle. She got caught up in her game, laughing to herself and racing every which way until her breath was too far behind her to continue. Some days she was curled up in a corner cradling the feather duster near her face when her husband and the girls returned home.

During one afternoon of dusting, she pulled out a cookbook boasting the best cookie recipes. She got to work on madeleines, peanut butter goodies, raspberry jam tartlets. The girls squealed to see the stacks of sweets on the table when they got home.

Is this what we're having for dinner? The youngest one stood at the table's edge with her tongue to her lips, calculating which cookie was within reach.

Is *this what we're having for dinner?* her husband asked without looking at her.

She stuffed a peanut butter goodie in her mouth and handed her daughters one of each kind. *If you want it to be*, was what she said, crumbs gathering at the corners of her mouth.

The medicine was not cheap, and though her husband said they were fine, she set to work cutting expenses where she could. She took up knitting scarves for the girls, but her hands were knotty from the injections and the knitting needles were long and unwieldy. She spent most of the time burrowing her hands into the basket of yarn she'd dug out of the basement, leftovers from the girls' school projects. It wasn't much of a loss, she knew, the girls had plenty of warm clothes for the winter, but there was a sense of defeat as she replaced the basket with its mess of colors onto the basement floor.

She sat back onto a stack of boxes to rest before ascending the stairs and there, right next to her toe, was an unmistakable mouse dropping. She stood up off the boxes, retracting her arms to her chest as though everything was probably covered in the stuff. She tip-toed up the stairs, wishing the whole way that she'd worn slippers. She became aware that she was alone in the house and, being unsure of just how many mice there were, she felt surrounded. She cleaned every surface, disgusted at the piles of crumbs she found behind the stove and refrigerator. She wanted to leave them no reason to come out of the walls.

She'd used all of her strength removing the stove and fridge from their designated cubbies, and could not replace them when she was done. Her husband found them mid-escape when he returned home.

What happened? he called to her from the kitchen. She sat up from where she lay on the couch. She hadn't heard him come in, didn't remember lying down.

I was cleaning, she yelled over the noise of him pushing the appliances back into place.

Huh? he said, coming around the corner. He was slightly out of breath, his face was red.

I saw mouse droppings in the basement. I wanted to clean so they wouldn't come out anymore. The house is such a mess.

The house isn't a mess, he said. He sat next to her and took one of her feet in his hands. She hadn't realized how cold her feet were until he began to rub the heat from his hands into them.

Mice don't infest clean houses, she said, and closed her eyes, imagining her feet were ice cubes that were melting all over her husband's hands.

We're not infested with mice, he said, switching feet. *You shouldn't be moving heavy stuff around.*

She wanted to protest, but didn't. When she woke again, he was carrying her up the stairs to their bedroom.

Have the girls eaten? she asked, panicked.

Her husband smiled and shifted so she felt closer against him. *They did,* he said. *They're asleep. They kissed you goodnight. You woke up and said goodnight.*

Oh, she said and lay back against him. He was so warm.

She dreamed that mice were coming out of the walls. She watched them, chastising herself for never noticing how many holes there were along the baseboards, underneath bookshelves, in the cupboards. They sniffed about the pantry, climbing all over their food; they buried themselves in the cushions of the couch. They tugged at the girls' bed skirt, hoisted themselves up and climbed through their hair. She woke when she saw a tail sticking out of the youngest one's mouth.

She shook her husband awake.

What? What is it? he said.

Do you hear them? she said to him, speaking close to his face.

Who? He sat up. It made her feel better to hear the concern in his voice.

The mice, she said, almost crying.

He looked at her then, with the anger of a practical joke victim, and lay back. After a long sigh he said, *Go to sleep.*

She felt, for a moment, that the windows had fogged against the winter air outside. The mice fell silent.

But the next morning they were at it again, scratching and squeaking, plotting and maneuvering. She made plots of her own, mapping the house in her head, marking the weak spots in the walls and in the floorboards with black electrical tape. When she was sure she'd marked them all, she coated little cubes of cheese in rat poison. She wouldn't be able to sleep, thinking about mice crawling through her daughters' hair, in the cupboards, on the other side of the wall where she rested her head ever so slightly during her morning showers.

She placed the cubes onto tiny pieces of napkin and lay them near the spots of tape. Though her heart wasn't in it, she dusted the bookshelves, her eyes darting to the memorized targets. She took her time in each room, hoping to find several unsuspecting mice dead around a nibbled bit of cheddar or mozzarella. After pacing back and forth, there still were none. She picked her bottom lip absent-mindedly, specks of rat poison settling in the tiny hairs around her mouth, forming a slight paste as it mixed with her saliva. She hurried from room to room. She pushed her ear against the walls, trying to find where the mice were congregating. Were they on to her plan? She got on her hands and knees, peering under the stove, placing her ear against the floorboards.

It was in this position that her husband found her, surrounded by splotches of tape and bits of cheese on what looked like doilies. A hundred little picnics. She was happy to see him, though embarrassed. She tried to inhale, to say, *You were right. There aren't any mice after all*, but her mouth wouldn't move. Something on his face, on his brow, seemed to tell her why she wasn't making any sounds. He had never looked at her that way before, and she felt scared for him.

She heard the girls chattering from behind, watched as he swung around and said something to them.

Okay! she heard her girls yell. Their footsteps retreated back down the porch steps.

I know, I made a mess, she wanted to say. She tried to sit up, but couldn't. Her breath went in and out in bursts that felt involuntary; something inside of her itched and moved about as though dodging a hand trying to scratch it. She focused all her energy on her right arm, on which she lay, urging it to push her upward. As she pushed, she grunted, and saw, stuck to the tip of her husband's shoe, a bit of cheese, crushed but clinging.

