

What People Do With Their Hands

by Timothy Raymond

I said, "If this rose doesn't grow another petal in twenty minutes, I'm burning down the neighborhood."

"Just let it go," said Paul.

"No," I said. "That's what's happening right here."

"You'll try again next year," said Paul.

"Someone sabotaged me," I said.

Paul rubbed my back lightly.

"You'll try again next year," he said.

Every summer, our neighborhood has the rose competition. Almost all of us on the block participate. Last year, Pete won. The year before that, it was Rachel. The year before that, it was Pete again. This year I thought I had a shot, with a rose that stood like a statue. Then, in the morning, right before the competition, I woke to find a petal missing. After that, the rose looked like an old sock.

"Let's head to our table," said Paul.

"I'm not going."

"But you spent all these weeks working," he said.

I hugged myself and pouted.

I said, "I'm not going."

I sat myself down on the grass.

"Okay," said Paul.

We had reserved a spot in the park, where the competition took place, with a nice wooden table I'd picked out myself at a secondhand furniture store. Paul had helped me carry it down there.

"You want me to at least bring back the table?" asked Paul. "I'll go for you."

I nodded.

He came back with the table on his back, his whole body hunched over, sweating, and just wet.

"If you're not going to go, then I'm heading back to work," said Paul.

"Okay," I said.

"Do something today," he said. "Don't just sit there and be angry."

"Okay," I said again.

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At the house, I turned on the small television that sits on the kitchen counter, to a station about food. A British woman was on, talking about how to bake fish the right way. As I watched, I looked around in the pantry and the freezer. I don't eat fish, but I figured I could do the same thing with chicken. I had all the ingredients, after all.

This was something.

The woman on the screen was telling me how to wrap tin foil around meat when I saw the mouse crawl under the refrigerator again. It was the third time in two weeks. Paul was supposed to take care of it, but apparently never did. I quit watching the television then, turning to the refrigerator instead, but the mouse just stayed there, hidden away.

This was also something.

"All right," I said to myself then. "Okay."

I came back with one of every style mousetrap sold by the local hardware store. While I was there, in the aisles, a salesman had told me that he liked the non-lethal traps especially.

He'd said, "I live at the edge of town, so I can just release them after they get stuck in the glue."

"Release them where?"

"In the fields just out of town."

"I thought they were supposed to die in the glue," I said.

"You can get them out," he said.

"You ever try these little cages?" I'd asked.

"Oh, sure," he said.

"How many mice do you get at your house, exactly?"

"Lots," said the salesman.

* * *

When I stepped back to see, the kitchen looked like a playground. There were glue sheets right in front of the refrigerator, and cages on either side, between the wall and the appliance itself. Little pieces of cheddar, like hearts, were in the cages. There was also one fancy trap in the middle of the kitchen floor that looked like a matchbox. It reminded me of the homemade traps from when I was a kid, the ones with the stick, the string, and the box, the traps that catch only air.

For the rest of the afternoon, I read in a chair pulled out of the living room and into the hallway, so that I could watch the kitchen.

Paul came home before any of the traps worked.

"Quiet," I said to him when he asked about the traps. "We don't want him to think anyone's around."

"Who?"

"The mouse," I said.

"I took care of that mouse," he said.

"Then there's another one," I said.

"You don't need traps," he said. "I just got some cheese and put a bowl over him when he came to get it."

I looked at him.

I put my finger up to my mouth.

* * *

Paul wanted to love that night. I did what I usually do when I'm not in the mood. I gave him a rotten kiss, just a mealy grapefruit, and turned back toward the wall.

"Fine," he said. "Dear me."

In the morning I woke to find that all the traps were still empty as a highway. Outside, picking up the newspaper, I saw that the woman across the street had won the competition. She had the homemade banner, the one made special every summer, propped up on her grass, right there in the center of the yard. It was a woman named Laura. She was a first-time winner.

"The new neighbor won yesterday," I told Paul as he cooked his eggs. "The woman across the street."

"At least it wasn't Pete," he joked.

"Sure," I said.

"You want to go for a drive today?" he said.

"I wonder what her rose looked like," I said.

"It must have been good," he said.

I sighed.

"No, I don't want to go for a drive today," I said then. "Let's go see a movie."

The movie was a matinee. It was a love story. I shared popcorn with Paul as we watched.

At the end of the film, one of the lovers died from a bee sting. He was allergic. The girl just cried as the guy drifted off.

"That was a sad one," Paul said, back outside.

"It ruined bees for me," I said.

"Ruined, really?"

"You know all those sunflowers in my parents' backyard?" I said. "As a girl, I would sit out there and count all the big furry bees that would land on the flowers."

"Huh," said Paul.

"They were the big ones," I said. "The big bees."

"Oh."

"That's how I remember bees," I said. "One, two, three bees."

"That's sweet," said Paul.

He put his hand, still greasy from the popcorn, on my neck.

I said, "One, two, three, four bees."

* * *

Paul actually wasn't home the following morning when I found the mouse on the glue trap, dead already, its whole body against the ground. I picked it up then, rolled the body in the trap, and drove to a veterinarian's office.

"I got this mouse," I said. "I didn't know what to do with it."

"Let me see," said the woman at the desk.

"I didn't know if I should just throw it away," I said.

"You know, they have traps that don't kill the mouse," she said. "They have those now."

"I heard that these glue ones don't actually kill them," I said.

"Do you have any idea what this glue is like?" she said. "You might as well stick a nail through the mouse, and right into the ground."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"We'll take care of it," she said.

"I didn't know," I said.

Her phone rang.

I slunk out.

I hugged Pete when he got home that afternoon.

"I guess the mouse is gone," he said. "I see the traps are put away."

"Yeah," I said.

"You took care of it," he said.

"Yeah," I said.

"That's great," he said.

He grabbed my shoulder.

"You want to make dinner together tonight?" he said.

"Okay," I said.

We had pasta, with ground turkey and onions. As we ate, we watched a show on the history channel about Native Americans.

Paul was sitting upright on the couch, still eating, when I laid myself down on his lap.

"You tired?" he asked.

"It seemed like a long day," I said.

"You want to fall asleep there?"

"I might," I said.

"Fine by me," he laughed.

I didn't fall asleep there, though. I fell asleep only later, in the bedroom, there in the basement of the house, on the little bed, and facing the wall, with Paul's big arm around my waist.

* * *

A week later, while taking my morning walk, I found a patch of fresh cement in front of Pete's house. It was just a single square in the sidewalk.

The sun was barely above the mountains to the south, and no one was around, so I took off my walking shoes and sat down on the solid sidewalk square next to the new concrete one. After only brief hesitation, I stuck my feet far down into the sidewalk, until I felt firmly rooted.

The cement was still wet, but firm enough so that I could halfway lean back while still holding myself up with my legs. I swished like this, slowly, for a few minutes before really feeling my movement slow down. After that, I got up and looked at my legs, bare and smooth only down to my knees, where the gray, bumpy look really took over.

I looked around then.

I looked down into the big hole where I was.

I grabbed the banner, 2008 Winner, from Pete's yard, and turned to stone as I ran back home.

* * *

In the story that I told to Paul, just after the movie, there were always a lot of bees on the sunflowers, just all the time. The truth, though, is that my mother would often kill the bees if she thought there were too many, so that there was maybe only one, or even none at all, at any given time during the summers.

One summer I took Polaroid photos of the bees so that, when my mother swatted them with her oven mitt, I could still see them flying around. It was their look that I liked so much, like yellow balls of cotton. And in one afternoon I got eleven pictures total.

I hung the pictures on my wall. It's how I learned flight in a windowless room.

* * *

But during the rose competition was the second time I felt my bare skin in wet cement. The first time it happened, I was a girl, with my father, at a small business expo in Chicago. A bunch of owners and investors met at a park downtown, filled with tables and concrete walkways up and down the rows. The idea was that some of the owners would find investors, or at least customers. Either way, according to my father, it was supposed to be a fun afternoon.

"You get to see what people can do with their own hands," is how he put it.

I don't really remember the owners, or the investors, or the products. All I remember is stepping in front of a booth manned by construction workers doing some demonstration with a wheelbarrow and cement, and getting myself soaked up to my ankle. While waiting for my father to pull me free, I listened to a restaurant owner, hunched over a table with food samples, yell his new slogan.

"Taste America," he said. "Taste It, America."

Someone walked up and took a small quesadilla from him.

"Taste America," he said again. "Taste It."

This was the first time.

* * *

Paul really didn't know about the banner until later. He found it one morning on the floor in the hall closet while looking for band-aids.

"This says Pete," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "Huh."

"You should give it back," he said.

"I think I'm going to do sunflowers next summer," I said.

"You should still give it back," he said.

"I'm tired of the roses," I said. "They're too finicky."

Paul looked at me squarely.

"Honey."

"Is that the word?" I said. "Finicky? Fickle? Is it fickle?"

"Honey," he said again.

I waited until Paul went to work that morning, then put the banner back in the hall closet.

It belongs here, in my house, with me. Go on and tell me different.

