

## The Notching

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You never know what you're going to find when you come back from a week's summer vacation. I'm always relieved to find the house still standing and no water in the basement. I never expected what I found this August.

I didn't notice it when we first returned. I was too busy unpacking, doing laundry, sorting mail, mowing the shaggy lawn. Then Monday through Wednesday, I was busy back at work, excavating the pile that had accumulated on my desk.

Thursday was my first day of slow-down, and the first day I noticed it: the smell of death. I got a whiff every time I passed through our front hall.

Like cobwebs at a Thanksgiving dinner, the stench didn't manifest itself until company arrived. Lucky for me, company was my very understanding neighbor, Chris.

"Do you smell something dead?" I asked her.

"I think I smelled something outside," she said. At the time, I wondered if this was a neighborly "save" on Chris's part, like the story of the society lady who "accidentally" spills her wine on purpose after her guest spills wine.

I was taking care of Chris's kids that day, so I gave young Nathan and Katrina the assignment of searching around the bushes outside for anything decomposing. We live in the country, where wildlife abounds.

The kids found nothing.

But the odor persisted. And still I didn't guess its source.

The next day, Nathan and Katrina came over again, as did my grandbaby, Oliver. By now, the stink had become our constant companion. We searched again around the perimeter of the house, with no luck.

Finally the light went on in my head, but not a happy light – more like a light where you finally see the monster and you're really sad you looked.

I suddenly knew the smell must be coming from the *mousetrap cupboard*, even though we usually catch mice only in fall and winter.

The mousetrap cupboard is a small storage area above the stove where we discovered mice “dirt” (my mother’s euphemism for turds) when we first moved in. New to the area, we learned cold-weather rural homes often get an influx of rodent refugees when the frost snaps. Rather than caulk up cupboard crevices around the stove vent leading to the attic, my husband, Mike, designated this our mouse-catching place.

So we cleared the cupboard and strategically placed mousetraps inside. Over the quarter-century since, the mousetraps have varied from the old-fashioned wood-and-wire ones to plastic ones (inefficient) and humane ones (too hard to use). And always, peanut butter has been the last supper for our prey.

I cried the first time we killed a mouse. They’re so cute, with those little ears! But after I found “dirt” in my silverware drawer, I quit crying.

When our four-year-old daughter, Anna, discovered we were catching mice in the cupboard, she decided to decorate the area for the critters. She grabbed her crayons and drew them a picture – it still hangs inside the cupboard door, 17 years later. It’s a portrait of a mouse.

There aren’t a lot of household jobs that Mike “owns,” but with most of them his lack of a sense of smell comes in handy. His jobs include catching mice, grilling meat, cleaning fish we catch, taking garbage to the curb, changing lightbulbs, and cleaning the fish tank. Mike takes pride in all his jobs.

... And, at 56 years old, he’s becoming eccentric. For instance, he dates all light bulbs to see how long they last. He fillets the smallest bluegill. He has a special grill tower contraption that gets charcoal hot FAST. He hasn’t found a way to add weirdness to garbage duty, but I’m sure that’s coming.

And the mousetraps... ah, the mousetraps. When he figured out which mousetraps work best, he started *notching* them. Like a Western gunslinger who notched the handle of his pistol for every kill, Mike carves a notch into the wooden base of the trap for every mouse that has its last supper there. Unlike most people who throw away the trap with the mouse, Mike re-uses the device after dropping the corpse into the bushes and cleaning the trap.

Anyway, when I deduced that the smell of death was probably emanating from the mousetrap cupboard, I gingerly stretched up to reach its doorknob. I creaked it open slowly – slowly – slowly – as if my slowness could change what surely lay in its dark depths. I’m too short to see inside, but I stood on tiptoe. Only then did I spy the corner of a trap and one mouse leg sticking up in unmistakable *rigor mortis*.

I slammed shut the cupboard door and started doing the shudder dance around the kitchen – “*Ew! Ew!*” I whined. Nathan and Katrina laughed at my dance, but Oliver just looked at me like he wasn’t sure who this lady was who had replaced his grandma.

To be sure I wouldn't forget to tell Mike about his mousetrap duty, I taped a note to the cupboard near his mail pile. The note read: "Dead rotting mouse." I figured that message was pretty clear, even if the stench wouldn't be clear to my non-smelling husband.

That night, I told Mike the whole mouse smell horror story, and he quickly moved to dispatch his quarry. When he opened the mousetrap cupboard door, even Mike could detect the whiff of mortality.

*Ew*," he said, but omitted the shudder dance.

I looked away. I didn't want to see the carnage.

Mike kept "*Ew*"-ing as he carried the trap outside.

Still looking away, I asked, "Are there any maggots?"

"Yes," he answered. "And the mouse and fur are all in pieces."

The combination of neglect and hot summer days must have done their parts in nature's work of decomposition.

*Ew*.

"Throw that trap out!" I hollered.

"No way! This is my lucky trap. I have to notch it!" he answered through the patio door.

I shook my head. I knew there was no use arguing.

A bucket of detergent water later, the cupboard smelled good again and the mousetrap was almost down to neutral.

The next day, our neighbor Mark and his friend Kenny stopped over on their way to a thesheree/ antique tractor show. We sat and talked a while. I raised the subject of dead mouse.

"Can you believe he won't throw out the old trap? He has to notch it!" I complained.

I should have known better to complain to two unshaven guys in ball caps who were on their way to a tractor show.

Kenny said, "Great idea! Now you should find a way to date the notches!"

He and Mark and Mike spent the next ten minutes considering various ways to mark month and year on each notch... or would it be best to simply separate notches by years?

I practiced dissociation.

Soon the mousetrap got properly notched (though not dated like the lightbulbs) and returned to its place in the mousetrap cupboard.

Within three days, we caught another mouse. To our shock, it was one of the plastic traps that caught it. I thought Mike would empty the trap and return it to the mousetrap cupboard, unmarked.

How wrong I was.

Busy with something else, I became aware of a funny noise in the basement. A few minutes later, Mike emerged, goofy grin on his face.

He had notched the plastic trap.

With a hacksaw.

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