**Of Mice and Sisters**

Rossie—a town in Iowa kept alive only by its many grain silos—is so small that it hasn’t been seen on a map since the 1970’s. Would it still be there if this grain elevator wasn’t? Probably not. Our little house in this tiny town is your typical farmhouse even though it isn’t on a farm per se. In front of our house, the grain elevator towers over it. Behind it we can see clusters of abandoned buildings. Its only other neighbors are a handful of other tiny houses and cornfields. To me, it qualifies as a farmhouse because it has the main ingredient any farmhouse has…mice.

I’m not talking about the cute little mice we read about in kids’ books or watch on cartoon shows. I’m talking about the ones that we hear crawling through the ceiling at night. Scratching. *Scratch, scratch, scratch*, as I try to fall asleep. Their tiny feet race from one side of the ceiling to the other mimicking the crawling sensation creeping up my spine with each step I hear. I listen to them as they switch paths and descend into the walls. I try to guess how many there might be. Scared to close my eyes—hoping the bright whites of my eyes would be enough light to make the critters want to stay away from my domain.

I sleep in the same bedroom my dad once shared with his six siblings. When we moved in last summer, mom decorated the slant-walled attic room with pretty pastels for me and my two younger sisters, Tracy and Elaine. Her masking attempt doesn’t hide the fact it is still an attic and home to mice. When I would complain to my dad about the mice problem, his response would be, “I’ll get to it.” But he never does. I guess he just couldn’t be bothered with traps.

Just like most teens, I grew accustomed to throwing my jeans on the floor so that I could wear them again the following day. One winter morning, it was so cold upstairs that it took me only two to three seconds to leave my warm blankets and be fully dressed and zipped into my jeans. However, the problem with being so quick, I soon learned, was that 2.5 seconds is not enough time for any mouse to escape who took refuge in my jeans the night before.

Let me tell you, there is nothing like the feeling of something warm and fuzzy crawling up the inside of your thigh to get you to take your jeans off faster than putting them on. As soon as my jeans were again in a bundle on the floor, the terrified culprit went racing out of my pant leg and into the closet.

Well, now I know they leave the walls at night. At least they stay on the floor, right? *No.*

About a week later, I was cured of always sleeping with my arms over my head*. I bet you can already tell where this story is going, can’t you?* Why did I stop this habit? Well, I only needed my fingers nibbled on once. One time of jumping out of bed and seeing a mouse on its haunches behind my pillow staring back at me in the moonlight. From then on, I kept my hands closer to my body and under the covers—hoping and praying that my pillow was a big enough barrier. I try especially hard to quell the surge of anxiety going from my nibbled fingers to my mind. I needed to stop thinking about the possibility that one could have crawled onto my face! Yuck!

That was enough! If my dad wasn’t going to control this growing population of four-legged fuzzies upstairs, I guess it would be up to me.  I was determined to not go to bed the following evening without having set mousetraps lying around. I convinced my dad to show me how to accomplish the task. Unfortunately, by doing so, I ended up being the one sentenced to mouse trap duty…indefinitely. Even though I benefited from this task, it became a drudge, being the only one willing to do it. At the time, there was no humane way of dealing with them, and they needed to be removed. They carried diseases and I wanted to be able to sleep again.

Nobody wanted to touch the wooden death traps that could never become completely clean from past victories. Yes, bloodstains and gut stains. Gross and grosser. Nobody wanted to smear the food into the little metal latch where mice teeth and tongue touched. Nobody wanted to get their fingers snapped if they didn’t hold the trap completely correct. The old-fashioned mousetraps were very sensitive, effective, and non-discriminating. They would take fingers or mice just the same.

One night, when I was switching out mousetraps…again, I decided to play a trick on my sister. Tracy was always telling me to do this job. She was terrified of mice. She was one year younger than me. She unfortunately inherited her eyesight from our mother. They both have worn Coke-bottle-bottomed-glasses for as long as I can remember. I returned the mouse trap to its spot under Tracy’s bed, but this time to catch my sister instead of a mouse.

I normally dreaded ascending the stairs to the scratching sounds, but tonight, I couldn’t wait. When we went to bed, I could see the trap was still in place. There was a black sock and a piece of string under the metal clamp. It was upside down which is usually what happens when it’s tripped. She was sitting on her bed with the trap right underneath her and her glasses on the nightstand. We were talking like we always did before going to sleep, waiting for Elaine to arrive before turning out the light.

I pretend to just notice the mouse trap is flipped over. “Hey, Tracy, it looks like we caught another one.”

“Where?” she asks as she stands up on her bed.

I point and say, “Look. Under your bed.”

She is too scared to look and walks over to Elaine’s adjacent bed and proceeds to walk the length of it before allowing her feet to touch the floor. She takes three big steps away from their beds and then, only then, does she dare to look under her bed to see.

“Cha, get rid of it for me.”

“It’s under YOUR bed. You fix it.” Meanwhile, I get out of my bed and go up to hers and grab the mousetrap by the dangling free latch. Like a typical nice, big sister, I wiggle it within two feet of her face…*payback for her expecting me to do this job all the time.*

She panics, runs downstairs, screaming. “Mom! Cha is chasing me with a dead mouse!” I follow close behind her laughing so hard that I can barely walk or talk.

“Look, Tracy…I want to show you something.” I tease.

She thinks it’s the mouse and I know it’s the sock. She thinks I’m taunting her, but I’m trying to share the joke. But I can’t get close enough for her to even glance my way.

“What’s going on?” my mom asks. Her peaceful book-reading time abruptly ended when Tracy tried to seek refuge between the back of my mom’s head and the wall the couch was against.

Tracy points accusingly at the object in my hand. “She found a dead mouse under my bed and is trying to touch me with it!”

I can’t take the buildup of giggles in my body anymore. I fell to the ground still holding onto my prank. My eyes tear up. I hold my aching sides with my one free hand as I take deep breaths in between each lung emptying laugh.

During my inhales, I hear my mom say, “Cha! You should know better than flinging dead mice around the house!”

 The second I am able to catch my breath enough to speak, I lift the trap again to show it to my mom and say, “It’s just a sock!”

Mom reaches out to grab my arm to keep the mouse trap away from her as she tries to take a closer look. Only when my mom finally laughs does my sister come close enough to investigate. She realizes what I said was true.

My mom grins and playfully pushes my arm away. “Still, get it out of here. Stop being so mean to your sister.”

Tracy says, “What?! There isn’t a mouse?” Her nervous giggle transforms into a relieved laugh.

Mom tries to hide her smile and says, “That was a good trick…you mean little shit. Back to bed.”

Tracy and I returned upstairs to set the mousetrap under her bed, again.

Tracy crawls back into bed. After a short pause, she says, “Thanks for doing the mousetraps.”

“No problem,” I say as I do my victory walk towards my bed.