Nora Hultman

The Rotting Mice of August

They were unusually many that summer, or maybe, worse at hiding. They seemed to get in everywhere in our old house. We heard them squeak, and I remember the stench when they had died in the walls. The indescribable sweet and bitter-sour stench that had to be waited out, since we couldn't get to them. We couldn't cut open the walls, could we? Anyway, most of the times, they got in under the sink. Chewed the garbage, left little pieces of plastic crumbs behind. Dad put out traps for them and sometimes he had to empty them several times a day, that summer. Now and again, if dad wasn't home, granddad had to come in and do it; mom rarely did it, Vera was never asked, and I, would never. I simply can't with their tiny bodies, all limp under the hard metal trap wire. That's how I usually lay when I sleep, as well. On my stomach, with my arms along the sides. Like a dead mouse.

Mom and dad were away for a few days and grandma and granddad's house, on the other side of the lilac hedge, stood empty for the week. They had gone to their beloved summer house near Gothenburg.

It was only me and Vera. Us and the big garden, the flowers, the tomato plants and the fence that desperately needed mending. The apple trees and the gnarled by old age-cherry trees that should probably have been cut down years ago. The swaying fields surrounding our garden and the sloping road that led down to the summer guests. The lake and the pine trees, the forest.

I was home again, but only for the summer, worked as a waitress at the local golf restaurant, and Vera had just graduated from the gymnasium. Even though mom and dad, grandma and granddad were away for a few days, we weren't alone. The dog was close to whoever was nearest, and the cats were around somewhere all the time, laying in the shadow from the lilac hedge or the birches, or wandering in and out of the house, sneaking up behind us with a meow asking for food when we least expected it. We had the pets, and each other.

And the mice.

It was getting late, and my cup of tea had gotten cold. I was reading a book by the kitchen table. I couldn't concentrate; my head was spinning, thinking about books I should read before August ended, thinking about poetry I wanted to write but thought I didn't know how to. Come September I was going to Lund University, to study literature.

Vera was out on the town with a bunch of her friends. I don't know exactly why I didn't come that night. Maybe it was so we wouldn't have to pay for a taxi. It felt so unnecessary to pay for it when it would take less than ten minutes by car anyway. We lived so close to town, but growing up it always felt like we were separated from everyone else.

And I wasn't close to any of her friends either. We had such different interests, me and my little sister, and she was so little, still. Especially that summer. She still felt like a child. I was getting used to another life, other things. Important things. Our hometown was getting too small for me, the people too dumb. Vera had started calling me *The Bohemian.*

Another day that summer, I watched a bat die. I finally had a free day from working at the ever so crowded golf restaurant and I tried to relax at home, strolled around the garden. I went past one of the water barrels next to the tomatoes. The sun prickled my neck, and I casually watched the leaves floating around in the almost still water. Couldn't put together that something dead would splash around like that. That was till I realized it wasn't a leaf at all, but a tiny, dark brown bat.

How do you save a drowning bat? I backed off, suddenly crying.

I went and got a spoon from the kitchen and scooped her up, put her on her back with the wings along her side on the stone table in the overgrown lilac arbor. Gently pressed the spoon against the tiny stomach. Barely audible, with her last breath, she squeaked, and my heart broke. If it was my attempts to get the water out of her tiny body, or if it was already too late, I'll never know. She died anyhow, lay so still with her head heavy against the mossy stone table. Didn't make another sound. Dad had to take her away later. And not even then, when he disappeared into the garden with the bat on a shovel, could I be really sure she was dead. I watched dad's back and thought, maybe she only needed a little bit of food, a little bit of warmth. Maybe she didn't die until dad put her in the grass and cut her in half with the shovel. Maybe it hadn't been too late earlier, maybe I had left her when she needed help the most.

There was a sudden bang from under the sink, like two knuckles going together, angrily. I listened carefully, lifted my gaze from the book, shocked. I got up, not really terrified, but staring in front of me, childishly. I understood that it was the mouse trap. There was a rustle and a quiet, whining sound. Then: silence. Something little had fought for its life in there, under the sink, and then submitted its soft body to the hard metal wires. Suddenly I saw the little brown bat in my thoughts, stretched out on the stone table in the overgrown arbor. Her tiny wings along her sides. Now a wingless little creature took its last breaths under the sink, died. Maybe from shock, from the horror of having your body clasped in a grip so tight it could be the devil himself. Maybe its back hadn't been broken at all, maybe it had died from a heart attack when it got caught the second after it got a hold of the little piece of food stuck in the front of the trap. Or maybe, it wasn't going to die for a long time.

I paced around the house. The dog was not to be seen anywhere, he was probably sleeping, tired after running around the garden, chasing the cats, all day.

It was late. Summer night dark out. I went out on the porch. Noticed how grandma and granddad's house looked like a giant, black rock against the dusky night sky. The stars shone like staring eyes. The air smelled of dry grass. There was a sweetness to that

smell that made me think of rotting mice, and I wondered if there were any in the walls right now.

I went back into the kitchen. The mouse would lay tortured under the sink until either me or Vera removed it, so that another one could take its place. Mom and dad wouldn't be home for at least three days and since I was the older sister, it befell on me to do the chore. But I wouldn't take it away. I couldn't. I thought about its back being broken, and if I were to touch its fur with one of my fingers by mistake. I was mortified.

And I couldn't continue reading by the kitchen table now, with a perfect view of the sink. It was like a doll house; I could see everything. And it was a mess in there. The tiny body broken beyond recognition, the neck and back crooked and a puddle of black blood floating out. The iron smell of blood mixed with the tanginess from emptied out tuna cans. I bit my nails and wondered when the mouse was going to start smelling, if we could hold out until mom and dad came back. I wondered what death smelled like and thought about the mice rotting in the walls.

I stood right next to the kitchen table, biting my nails. I couldn't, however, make my legs move. I was stuck.

Just as I had been when I was little. Stuck, in front of horror. Grandma and grandad have always had dogs, and once, many years ago, they had a really mean one. Ludde. You wouldn't dare go near him or even past him. Ludde was kept on a leash close to the wood boiler, and if you had to go to the bathroom when you were at their house, you had to go past him, since the wood boiler was next to the only bathroom. One time I had had to go pee, and had gotten stuck, like a statue, when Ludde started barking as I tried to dare walk past. He was leashed and couldn't get to me, but he tried, and he screamed like crazy. I don't know for how long I stood there, but I remember it being like staring into eternity. Grandma had to come carry me away.

When Vera was very little and didn't know any better, she had gotten too close to Ludde when he was eating his food. It was easter and everyone was outside, celebrating. Thank God everyone was there. Dad pulled her away from Ludde and ran to the car. I remember him screaming over his shoulder, so that granddad would hear, *that dog is to be put away NOW!* and I remember granddad and everyone's crooked necks when he said that, but I can't remember when Ludde died.

When they got home from the hospital, Vera was all right. She still, even today, has the scar on her cheek. I also have one, but on the other cheek, and from a different accident. But we have one each, nonetheless. When we were small, we would put our cheeks together so that the scars lined up. *Then they'll know we're sisters! If we lose each other, they can just look at our cheeks and they would know! We would get back together!*

I forced my gaze up from the sink, looked at the clock and stopped biting my nails. It was getting late and I figured she would want me to come get her soon. I called her.

She picked up right away but spoke in a slurry, distant voice, as if she wasn't holding the phone right.

"Do you want me to come get you? It's after twelve."

I started to regret that I hadn't come. If at all, it could have turned out to become one of those random nights that we could reminisce about years later. Like that one time two guys bought us several Jägermeister shots and we laughed and thought we were going to be raped. Or that time my ex-boyfriend started beating up another guy at the club, for trying to remove my bra, after I had gotten so wasted, and probably drugged, that I could barely speak.

I thought I had needed a quiet night alone, that I needed rest, to have silence around me after all those hectic shifts at the golf restaurant. I didn't mind being at home, waiting for her, but now I didn't feel like being alone anymore. As a matter of fact, something flooded inside of me when Vera answered:

"Yes, okey. Can you please come and get me now, Nora?"

She stood outside of the bar with people I did and didn't recognize. I drove the car close to them, called out for her through the open window. She stumbled around and caught sight of me, smiled and kind of squinted at me. I figured her eyes were starting to feel dry after a whole day of wearing contacts.

She said goodbye to her friends and started stumbling towards me. As she did so, I felt something warm inside of me. I felt proud and calm that she wasn't going to go home alone, or end up at a stranger's house, something I had done myself a few times already, even though I was barely twenty at the time.

Vera looked like a tiny little bat, with the jacket hanging over her shoulders, as she walked up to me. She opened the door and sat down. No one was going to hurt her tonight.

If I could have, I would have come and gotten her every time she needed me. I would have gone back to the time Ludde bit her face and shoved her away so that she would be safe. This, I felt alongside the warmth inside of me. And the feeling would grow stronger, in just a few years. I just didn't know it then, when I drove us home. She was telling me about her night, about the friend-related drama, and I told her about the mouse-under-the-sink-incident. Her eyes grew big, and she laughed.

It wasn't as scary with the mouse, when I had her. That's what I tried to convince myself, but I still felt weird. We were going to look at it. Vera stumbled down on the kitchen floor, sat herself in front of the sink, with the dog fussing around her legs.

"Okey, Vera", I said, "you have to open."

I filmed with my cell phone with the flash on so I wouldn't have to look straight at it.

“Look”, she said, “there’s a fucking mouse there, Nora.”

I stared at my cell phone screen and Vera had to keep the dog away again and again until I said I had stopped filming. Vera had already lost interest and closed so that the mouse lay in darkness again. I watched the video several times, looked straight into the bright shining eyes. Could it really be dead, with its eyes wide opened like that? Could it really be dead, with its eyes glimmering like the sun? Was it even laying completely still? I had to look again. And again. The short video flashed before my eyes. The mouse wasn’t really a mouse either, was it? It was more like a field mouse, or a rat, even. Bigger than I imagined.

Vera shouted my name, wanted me to stop obsessing over the video and come out so that the dog could pee and we could go to bed.

“But, I think, if I can look at it in the video first, I can then look straight…”

“Noraaaaaa! Let’s go!”

She had tired, I could hear it in her voice.

We walked the regular bit. Turned around to go back just as the birch alley began. It was enough for the dog to pee and for Vera to sober up, I thought.

We screamed at the barn, made noises and laughed as the echo came back in puffs, as if we hadn’t done that millions of times already. The dog screamed as well, ran around our legs and wiggled his tail. The night sky was a deep, dusky orange against the black forest line and the stone cairns out on the fields were the fantasy fortresses where we had played in our childhood. We had rescued each other from evil princes and stumbled into the first plays of sexual desire with our Barbie dolls. The old stone walls put up by farmers one hundred years ago ran alongside the fields. Maybe one or two of the cats were watching us through the shrubs as we approached the house.

We were still surrounded by all that. We hadn’t had those years yet. Those years separated, studying in different parts of Sweden. Years of Vera, dating guys that would scream at her, make her small and still as a statue. And I, who wouldn’t dare to look her straight into the eye, afraid to figure out if she was, or wasn’t, dead.

We weren’t there yet. We hadn’t had those years yet and Vera was still so little, like a child. We let the dog loose and ran side by side in the lukewarm summer night.

Just outside the house Vera lay flat on the grass, on her stomach. Her purse got stuck under her; she still looked like she had just stumbled out of the club, with her smeared makeup and everything.

“Oh, look! It’s a dead mouse!” I joked.

I knew it was something that she would laugh at, but now she just made a bunch of sounds. I figured she must be drunker than I first thought. Looking at her, closing her drunkenly eyes and resting her face in the grass, I felt something dark sting inside of

me. The warmth from before, turning weird, aching. I poked her gently with my foot and directed the flash from my cell phone at her face.

Vera's hair was light, and her skin was beautifully sunburned. She sought out the sun in the same way I stayed in the shadows. On her free days, she put on her headphones and lay disciplined in the sun, turned around every now and then so that every part of her body would get a little bit of the precious light. On days such as those, I would be on the shadowy porch, looking up from my book from time to time, watching her. She would call me *The Ghost*, and she still does, even now. Even after everything.

I didn't know that all of those things would happen. All I could think was to get her inside and get her into bed.

"Come, my little Vera", I said.

She managed to get up only because I held both of her hands.



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