The Old Man & the Mouse

A short story by Jenny Charest
“Ah, gotcha,” Mr. M cried victoriously, emitting a puff of exhaustion after a long chase through the house. He checked the clock on the stove. Half past three. It was just ten minutes ago that he looked up from his book to see a mouse finishing its quick trek across the living room.

He lifted his foot off of the small body. The mouse was definitely a young one. Mr. M recalled his own younger days, imagining that if he were a mouse, he would have thought nothing of running across a stranger’s living room either. The white fur had the pattern of the sole of Mr. M’s shoe imprinted on it in dirt. To his relief, it wasn’t stained in blood. The mouse’s back, straight and healthy just moments before, was now mangled and crooked.
“Eh, to hell with it.” He gave the mouse a light kick and it rolled over on its side, its paws and tail hitting the carpet with a dull thud. Mr. M continued to kick the mouse until it was through the front door, off the porch, and into the grass safely away from his house.

Later that day, Mr. M was settling back down with his book when there was a knock at the door. It had taken him so long to get settled down again, he started to wonder whether he had enough time left in the world for things like recreational reading. Grumbling, he started to get up and kept thinking about that damn mouse. It was just a mouse, he reassured himself. *It was a young one, sure, but certainly old enough to know better than to run through my living room. The unnatural angle of its back was well-deserved. Plus, it’s just the circle of life, isn’t it?*

He turned the deadbolt above the doorknob, feeling suddenly flush with the shame of a murderer. Part of him expected to see a police officer on his doorstep, or a representative from animal protective services inquiring if Mr. M knew of the whereabouts of a certain young mouse gone amiss, the mouse’s mother likely concerned. But when he opened the door, it was just the woman from Christ’s Church on her yearly donation run.

She introduced herself and asked if Mr. M had anything he could spare for the church drive.

“Yeah, I think I’ve got a box of Misty’s clothes out in the garage. I’ll be right back, if I can find it.”

“Oh, thank you,” the churchwoman said to Mr. M’s already turned back. He barely heard the woman’s voice as he took off in search of the clothing. Lately, the trek from the house to the garage had begun to feel like a hike to the old man. He left the door half-open en route to his search for the hand-me-downs. But lingering guilt about the mouse continued to plague him en route, momentarily distracting him from the task at-hand.

“That mouse’s damn spirit better appreciate this,” he grumbled. He had turned the church lady away every year for the last twenty years. Before that, of course, she
was invited in and offered hot chocolate and *his* Christmas cookies while Misty nagged at him to get the box of donations she'd stashed away in the attic.

He flicked the light switch on and the bulbs above him flickered to life as he grumbled down the steps and found himself surrounded by teetering stacks of boxes. Some were labeled TOOLS, others CHRISTMAS DECO in Misty’s cursive penmanship, but most of the boxes were labeled MISTY in his own rough print.

He examined each stack, searching for the easiest box to grab.

“This better get that damn mouse off my conscience. Look at me, feeling sorry for a damn rodent. I’ve lost my mind for sure this time,” he muttered to himself like the curmudgeonly old man he had become as he searched through a stack of Misty’s boxes that were close to the ground.

“No…nope…anniversary…trip to…that time we....Damn it, Misty. Don’t you have any old junk?” He whipped himself around, his eyes searching every corner of the garage. He grew exasperated, and was about to give up and accept that the journey out there had all been in vain, thinking that night he’d be kept awake by his aching everything and dreams of a certain small rodent visitor whose welcome had been cut short by the old man’s boot. Perhaps in those dreams, he considered, he would even be the mouse.

That’s when he saw it. The biggest box in the garage and he’d walked right past it. It was parked beside his abandoned running and dress shoes under a warped work bench. Above were Misty’s dusty ice skates hanging on a hook next to his raincoat. The box was marked MISTY’S CLOTHES, something he no longer had any use for.

Using all that was left of his strength, he pulled the box from its place along the wall, placed it down, and stood back up to wipe his brow. Then, Mr. M immediately froze in place with his eyes glued to the wall where the box had been just moments before. Instead of the once-white plasterboard, there was a tiny door about a foot high with a round, brass doorknob on its left side. It was missing chips of wood here and there and looked to be as old as the rest of the house. Mr. M was sure he’d never seen it before, although he hadn’t been through the garage since he and Misty were
younger. But he would have remembered something like this, he thought, or wouldn’t he?

He had nearly forgotten about the woman from Christ’s Church when she knocked on the open garage door.

“Jeez!”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten ya,” she said in her Wisconsin accent. “You’ve just been out here for almost twenty minutes now. I wanted to make sure you were alright.” Her eyes panned around the garage, locking onto the door Mr. M had discovered a minute before.

“Oh, what’s that? That’s the tiniest door I’ve ever seen. What’s it—.”

“Here,” Mr. M grunted as he thrusted the box into the woman’s unprepared chest hurrying her out of the garage.

“Alrighty. Thank you, sir,” she said, quickly regaining her cheery composure as he pushed her back through the door. “The church surely will—.” Mr. M slammed the door and returned to the mystery in his wall.

“Have a super day!” He heard the woman call out as she showed herself out of his residence.

“Yeah, right. A super day,” he half-grumbled, half-yawned. He pictured Misty standing next to him, saying he ought to go to bed. He was tired, that’s all. When he woke up he’d feel better.

He smiled at the thought and whispered her name, which seemed to bring her to life even more. She was standing next to him where the church woman had stood, holding something small that he couldn’t make out. His vision was fuzzy like in a dream, but she looked exactly as he remembered. Her brown hair was tied neatly in a bun at the back of her head. Her kind eyes watched him patiently. He didn’t have time to see anything else, though, because what she held finally came into focus.

The listless body of the white mouse lay pathetically in the palms of her hands. Mr. M’s own brown footprint confronted him through ruffled fur that was being
smoothed back by his wife’s delicate hand. He looked up at her slowly, wide-eyed. Her once loving face was gone, replaced by something unsettlingly unfamiliar. It took a moment to realize what it was. Disappointment.

She was going out of focus now, her blurry face no longer looking at him but at the little deceased mouse. As she turned away, he saw wet spots on the mouse’s fur. A few more drops fell before she was completely out of view.

Mr. M’s eyes rested on the door. A pulsing pain formed in his head. Sharper ones had moved into various parts of his body. He needed to lie down, and carefully began to work his way through the house to a place he could rest.

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He awoke the following morning, enjoying those blissful few seconds of amnesia, but it was not long before he remembered the mouse, the door, and then his wife. At first, he tried convincing himself that it had just been exhaustion or, perhaps, his medication causing him to hallucinate the entire scenario. But deep down, he knew every second had been real. When he finished his morning coffee, he went into the garage. The door was still there.

Mr. M crept toward it and paused, his heart pounding. He wiped his hands on the front of his pajama top and bent downwards, inching his hand toward the tiny doorknob. Then, in one quick motion, he turned the knob and tugged. Nothing. The knob barely rattled.

“Well then. That takes care of that problem.” He turned back toward the house then froze solid. Mr. M slowly turned back to the small door and waited. The door stared back innocently, but he was sure he had seen the doorknob rotate.

_This must be how it starts, the illness of old age. Senility. Today, I’ll think I saw a tiny doorknob turn on a tiny door. Tomorrow, I won’t remember how to put my shoes on._

He suddenly had a vision of himself lying in his bed while a nurse brought his dinner, spoon-feeding him bite by bite.
He was rambling about a little magical door in the garage. His nurse nodded, half listening. Then he grew mad. She needed to listen, so he started yelling.

“The door! The door! The door!” Then, he was holding onto the doorway of the garage and leaning on a cane while the nurse patiently pointed to an solid wall.

“It’s just an old closet,” Mr. M said aloud. The doorknob turned again. All the way this time, and the door slowly crept open. The small white mouse with a dirty shoe print stood on its hind legs, pushing the door open. Mr. M barely noticed that the mouse’s back was once again structurally sound. He couldn’t take his eyes away from the deep black dots the mouse was starting at him through. Vacant and vengeful.

Mr. M stifled a scream as the mouse calmly dropped onto all fours and entered the garage, nonchalantly kicking the door closed with its back foot. His eyes were wide like the poster of a horror film. The skin on his forehead and nose sparkled with sweat that came to the surface as the mouse inched toward him. He took a few small, defensive steps backward then stumbled over a stack of three boxes haphazardly piled in the middle of the garage. He grasped for them to keep his balance as they tumbled over. The little mouse didn’t even flinch. Instead, he moved forward with the same methodical pace. His little body blocked the path to the door, leaving Mr. M trapped with his back against the boxes.

The mouse was about a foot away when Mr. M stood with his hands against the boxes, mouth agape, as the rodent stopped moving and rose up on its hind legs into the air. Dread filled every ounce of Mr. M when he heard tapping on the other side of the little door. It only took a moment to realize it was the thumping of thousands of little feet and tails.

In another moment, they were spilling through the tiny door, climbing and leaping over one another, making a spiral pattern on the wall that ended on the floor continuing on past the white mouse whose face had suddenly taken on a sinister smirk that could only be described as smug.

They raced toward him by the dozens, the pattering of their paws unbearably loud. A scream finally left Mr. M’s mouth as they began to climbed up his legs and onto his torso, their tiny claws puncturing a million needle-sized holes in the thick
fabric of his pajamas. He looked down to find the white mouse in the lead. It was standing on his chest and seemed to be defying gravity. Face to face with the little creature he’d crushed just the day before, he felt his knees wobble. The mouse had been dead; he knew it!

His eyes instinctively squeezed shut as his back hit the ground. When he opened them, Mr. M found himself drowning in an ocean of mice. He couldn’t scream or breathe as they began to fill his mouth. He looked around, trying to find something to help him get away and there was Misty standing above him. Lifting one hand out of the mice, like a hand out of water, Mr. M reached for her as the mice left cuts up and down his arm as they spilled off.

Misty looked down at him with her kind, comforting old eyes. Mr. M almost managed a smiled as he held out his hand for her help, but suddenly, the eyes he’d always known were gone and a smoking hatred hit took their place.

“No,” he whispered. “Misty, please. Misty…”

The little white mouse darted up his arm, leaping from his hand and into hers. Misty’s face had returned to normal and she seemed to be at peace. She looked back and smiled as she turned away from him, stroking the mouse. In an instant, she was gone and he was lying alone on the garage floor. No mice remained, but a searing pain radiated through Mr. M’s back. He laid on the floor, but didn’t even attempt to stand up. He knew he wouldn’t be able to even if he had tried. He just laid there, thinking until help came. His back, straight and healthy just moments before, was broken.
Jenny Charest is a sophomore majoring in graphic design at Lynn University. She grew up in Florida and loves reading, drawing, and painting. She has been writing stories since her fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Holzbauer, taught her how. The idea for *The Old Man and the Mouse* came from a book that was used in Mrs. Holzbauer’s class as writing inspiration—a book of strange pictures accompanied by vague captions. The stories from fourth grade were lost, but after she rediscovered the book, she began writing again.
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