

Chew

When my husband and I were moving into our dream house last year after ten years of marriage (the third for each of us) and after moving out of our empty-nested Brady Bunch Mansion, we reveled in the awaiting paradise on our horizon. On which horizon stood our pastel blue, 1923 cottage, with its Key West style veranda, creaky oak floors and sun dappled front yard, two blocks from Sarasota Bay.

The camera filming our lives held steady that beautiful wide-angle scene as we shuffled boxes, unpacked, placed our belongings and hung pictures. Then the camera zoomed in on our cozy retreat. And that's when the creepy music began tinkling in the background.

We love our house and our new lives so much, when we first found the chew hole through the loaf of bread sitting on the counter over night, certainly, it was no big deal. "Oh, honey!" I sang from the kitchen, "We have a mouse in the house."

Taking a lunch break from unpacking, (after tossing out half the loaf of bread and making sandwiches with the remainder), I was dreamily looking out my new dining room window to the leafy back yard, when I saw a Big Black Rat sunning itself by the wooden swing. Do rats sun themselves? Aren't they nocturnal? Why was he looking at our house? I looked down at my sandwich. Could it be? (Cue creepy music again, louder this time.)

I called the company that the previous owner had used for pest control and termite tenting. They would be familiar with the house.

I was very pleased with the guy who showed up that afternoon. He walked around our house big-shouldered and scowling, like John Goodman's exterminator in *Arachnophobia*. "Yeah take that you rat, this guy will getcha. Unh Huh."

But the kid who showed up Monday morning to exterminate all rats forever from our dream house said to my husband, "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do."

He eventually set some traps in the attic, set ominous black bait boxes around the perimeter of the house, like the ones you see around a Wal Mart in the country, and a few days later another guy—a rat deterrent expert I assume— showed up to foam-seal various cracks, holes and gaps around the house.

Meanwhile the skittering and pattering through our walls, ceiling, and floors drove me to insanity. "Squirrels on the roof," my husband said one morning at breakfast.

I didn't think so.

The lady we'd bought the house from had spent months away at a time, and after her husband died, she laxed on some general maintenance. We knew this from accompanying the home inspector around the house, where he showed us the screens covering the ten inch high crawl spaces had fallen away. Our house had been party time for the local rat population, and now they were break-dancing above my head early mornings while I drank my coffee.

After the Rat Patrol kid set the traps in the attic, I was awoken one night to a *thumpa-thump* above me. The thumping continued, and then an eep eep eep accompanied the *thumpa-thump*. I shook my husband awake. "Listen!

"Um, oh, yeah, we got a rat!" a man dreaming of the great kill, he awoke quickly.

I didn't share in his excitement. "Well, what kind of trap is that? It's not dead." *Thumpa-thump, eep eep eep.*

"They put glue traps up there. He'll be dead by morning, go back to sleep."

I lay there looking at the ceiling. A few inches of drywall separating me from a dying rodent. I wondered, if only momentarily, if the walls would soon start to bleed.

The next day, after several panicked calls from me to the Rat Patrol to come fetch the trap, they showed up at two in the afternoon. I was at work, thankfully for them, for I was so livid and I felt weird, traumatized somehow. My house had been poisoned by an unseemly visitor, and they were taking their sweet time to retrieve the souring carcass.

At 2:30, my husband called to tell me what they found in the trap.

A LEG.

And now, I was afraid of my house. Its walls *were* bleeding. And somewhere, in those bloody walls, a three-legged rat was gimping around.

Hyperventilating at my desk, I called the Rat Patrol.

"I want real rat traps," I told the lady on the phone, "Not these glue thingies."

"Those are the most humane traps, it's all we use," she said in her fake customer service voice.

"Oh, really? A sticky rat chewing his leg off for hours is *humane*? I want giant rat traps with a guillotine to cut their heads off, Snap! Instant death! That's humane."

The next day the kid came back with proper rat traps and set them in the attic and some under the stairs.

Over the next several months, *snap-snap-snap*, traps went off. The Rat Patrol came to retrieve the carcasses. The break-dancing in the ceiling and walls wore down to some periodic waltzing, I kept calling the Rat Patrol to Seal Up This House! One night upstairs before bed, I heard a *snap-clamp-eep!* above me in the hallway. I told my husband, get this dying rat out of my attic now, or I'm going to a hotel to sleep. My husband called his agile son, down the attic access steps went, up he went with a plastic bag and a pair of tongs.

Out to the porch I went with a glass of rum, shaking with visceral fear.

My husband got excited over every rat caught. "We're getting them!" he said, as if he was capturing every single fish in the sea.

"We need to prevent them from coming into the house in the first place," I said, deadpan, beaten down.

“It’s like Whack-a-Mole, catch a few, ten return. What I want to know is: how are they getting in?” The Rat Patrol came and foamed and foamed, they sent out their expert foamer, he went onto the roof, we trimmed overhanging palm fronds. I bought sage and purified the house. I burned incense. I read stuff online that could work: peppermint, mothballs (the mothballs really stank up the place) then read that all this was bunk. Finally, the skittering through our walls and ceilings stopped.

But something else was going on during our first ten months in our new house. Over the ecstasy of gardening, bike riding, wine on the porch, small dinner parties, sunsets at the bay, there hung a repulsive scent in my kitchen. A scent that only I smelled, apparently. I have known that since I was a child, I beheld a keen sense of taste and smell, often detecting what others could not. My husband, through his glee in rat-trapping, smelled nothing. For me there was an olfactory disturbance mornings when I came downstairs in the dark to my kitchen, in anticipation of the peaceful aloneness of writing.

I smelled a rat. And once, in my kitchen, when I flicked on the light, I even saw a rat scamper into a space between the baseboard and kitchen cabinet left of the stove.

Rats, I learned perusing Google, do not have sphincters. They skitter and pitter, simultaneously.

No wonder they’re so damn gross.

So in addition to sage, incense, and now an apothecary diffuser with ylang-ylang and patchouli, there was bleach.

I had had enough. I’d had enough with men and their sissy traps and their sissy cans of foam and their sissy screens and steel wool. I put on my woman cape and called a friend of mine, a fabricator, who makes all things out of solid stainless steel.

“I need a rat screen,” I said to Darrell. “Sixteen gauge, perforated, eight feet long by ten inches high.”

He complied.

I hired a handyman to remove all the gunky orange foam and the sissy screen in front of the crawl spaces, and concrete in my new stainless steel barriers. I had him block up the space between kitchen cabinet and baseboard to the left of the stove.

“Un-hunh. Chew through THAT motherfuckers!” (John Goodman has nothing on me.)

The creepy music subsided. The walls stopped bleeding. For two weeks I was a proud superhero.

On Easter Sunday I came downstairs and was assaulted by The Smell. The previous day I had mopped the floor, bleached the counters and washed the rugs, but there was that smell again, a pungent, sour stench, like rotting diapers.

“I don’t smell anything,” my husband said.

“Of course you don’t.”

I considered that, after years of rat orgies under my kitchen, their smell had simply permeated the space

under the oak floor, and that fluctuations in humidity and bay breezes periodically carried in the scent. Someday, the scent will be gone, yes, for my new rat screen will keep those dreadful rodents away from my kitchen, my paradise, my forever house.

That afternoon, in the kitchen happily deboning a chicken for dinner and listening to Americana music, there was a bump in the cabinet by the wine glasses. *Eep-Eep*.

I snapped to attention, tip-toed out of the kitchen and turned down the music on my computer. No. Could it be? Silence except for birds chirping outside. I stood for several minutes, mind racing, poised in attack stance, chicken-fat hands raised, still gripping boning knife. The ice maker clunked. Sure, that's what it was, I told my hyper-alert self. Music turned back up. Back to kitchen to rub garlic and rosemary on the poultry.

While garlic and Americana permeated the air, a *boom-crash!* stopped my heart. My head whipped toward the sound to see the creature landing on the oak floor from under the wine glass cabinet, the *tinka-tink* of razor sharp claws skidding along the wood. It ran straight toward me along the baseboards under the dishwasher and kitchen sink, my Psycho-shower-screams driving it to do a three-sixty and scurry back into whatever space he'd been inhabiting. Husband running into the kitchen, fear drawn onto his face. "What's wrong?"

"This is MY kitchen! MY fucking kitchen!" I ranted. "Why is he running around in the daytime? How did he get in to my house? HOW did he get in? Put a trap there right now!" Pointing, with shaky finger, at the space under the cupboard.

Hubby went to fetch a trap. My breaths were short and ineffective. I had seen Death, a ten-inch long, bloated gray Death, crashing into my peaceful kitchen, a stinking, plague-ridden festering creature, who left the ghost of terror in its wake. I struggled with the refrigerator door, adrenalin rocking my nervous system. I snatched a beer and asked hubby for the opener, for I couldn't walk *over there* where *that thing* had come from under the cupboard. "Stay in here with me please while I cook?" I asked hubby. "I can't be in here alone, with *it*." Godammit! Why is it in here?" I whined.

Thumpa-thump it answered from under the cupboard. I jumped up into a triceps dip on the kitchen counter, heart in my throat, feet kicking above the floor.

"I think maybe it's trapped inside the house," Hubby said. "Your rat screen worked too well."

Bill Wolak

Like Shadows Climbing the Moonlight

