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The Interpreter

By Jordan Pelc

Though he had had so much exposure to it professionally, in his heart the interpreter always felt that he learned what he needed to know about death and dying one night as a boy at summer camp: the night they caught the mouse. It was almost a typical night. The boys were meant to be sleeping and were not, had instead been wrestling and telling jokes and putting toothpaste in each other's shoes, until the rowdiness of boys their age was pulled to a sudden focus by a discovery: first too fleeting to believe, too hard to discern against the darkness, too difficult to separate anxiety from imagination. But quietly now, their flashlights organized, it became more real: rapping against the insides of the cabin; little flashes of soft brown appearing in the candy they all secretly hid around their beds. A mouse. A little brown mouse had invaded their cabin.

He remembered taking the mouse onto the porch that night. He remembered the night, the country night, liquid black and viscous, seeping through their windows. And the sudden sky as they emerged from the cabin, thick with stars like distant lords in a great swirling sweeping cosmic blackness. The toilet stall was before them on the porch, its wooden half door scrawled with graffiti like a gas station restroom: "Flush twice! It's a long way to the kitchen!" "You are holding the future of the nation in your hand!" He remembered the door opening to reveal the toilet, its bowl of water, huge mosquitoes disturbed into frantic flight by the boys' lights. He remembered the water.

It hadn't been their first plan. They had held a sort of council after they'd caught the mouse. Catching it had been easy: it was cornered; all it could do was run between the boys in the terrifying brightness of their flashlights until inevitably, pathetic and exhausted, it tumbled into their hands. It was only then that the difficulty started.

Throw it in the woods. He remembered the voices. He would think of them often in his work. The young man from Mexico with his yellowing brown eyes, the way his bruised legs and abdomen swelled huger and huger while his face dissolved into the weeks he spent in that same hospital bed. The interpreter remembered the doctor, medical equipment and pieces of paper peeking from the pockets of his white coat, standing before his patient and making eye contact and speaking words he knew he could not understand: "How are you today?" "Are you comfortable today?" "I wish there was something I could do for you." The interpreter remembered the room so well. A bouquet of blue balloons bobbing weakly by the radiator. Get-well cards and potted plants accumulating on the window ledge the way they always do when patients don't go home. The young man's parents would arrive every day to smile smiles of mute appreciation as the nurses made adjustments to their son. His parents were always so glad to see the interpreter, to find in his translation some relief. The interpreter had always loved their language, the luxury of its R's, the sincerity of its vowels. He felt it filling the space

that patient and doctor left for him as they continued to hold each other's eyes, their voices passing through him as if they were his own: "I wish there was something I could do for you."

Throw it in the woods. They discussed it at length. A voice insisted that mice always find their way home. No matter how far into the forest they brought it, it would return to them. The boys' concern was sincere. They believed the facts. They didn't want to torture the mouse, terrorize the mouse, have to catch it over and over again until its mind broke from torment. They had to find a better way.

When they dropped it in the water, none of the boys had expected that the mouse would swim. At first they just watched. Focused their lights on the little creature and waited for the plan to take. Their shadows hovered in half-shapes. Stars deepened the night. And still, the mouse swam. Minutes passed. The boys adjusted their lights, looked at each other, stared at the water. Waited.

The mouse swam. It showed no signs of weakening. They realized they had no idea how long this might go on. Hours, perhaps. Hours of slow and terrible torture. They had to do something. Voices again, council. They checked the mouse: no change. Considered their options. Still swimming. Asked what they could do. Swimming, swimming, still swimming. No sign of tiring at all. The voices were sincere. There was nothing of their usual rowdiness left. They couldn't let this go on. They paused. Swimming. They had no choice.

A boy tried the flush. They watched. The mouse swam. They flushed again. Still swam. The voices became urgent now, desperate. There was an acuity to the swimming the boys had never seen. And they saw the mouse's face, the mouse's little face, swimming against the current, struggling to stay alive, as the interpreter and his cabin-mates pushed faster and faster against a weakening flush that tired more quickly than this awful little mouse. He remembered that face, that simple, primordial face, panicking in the water, squealing like an accusation, swimming without a plan.

A strange maturity overtook the group:

"Guys, be responsible."

"Guys, do the right thing."

Even: "Guys, we have to stick together."

They began turning their heads, their bodies, looking around their physical space for a moral solution, and all the while some boy's hand held tight to the flush, and the mouse outswam the current with its child's face held like terror above the sea. They rushed around, looked for options, found the broom. They stared at the mouse, begged with their eyes that it would tire, that the current would take it, that the mouse would mercifully be gone. But the current tired faster than the creature. Swimming, still swimming, pathetic and exhausted and horrendous, until at last cornered one of the boys pushed the mouse down the drain with the broom.

And then relief. So sudden a moment it may not have existed, so welcome all else was redeemed. The interpreter felt it, the boys felt it, the dead mouse felt it – a crescendo of pain

transcending into mercy, torment released in an instant like held breath. They made sure it was real. Watched the dark water refill the toilet bowl. Poked around the porcelain and at last let go the flush. Silence relaxed to hesitant 'how are you's, to tentative conversation, to their usual boisterous noise. They eventually realized they had to be in bed before their counsellors returned. They rushed to their sleeping bags; the interpreter was sure they forgot to brush their teeth. There was little else to remember from that night; little else was needed. The interpreter remembered relief: so real he could never find the words to voice its truth.

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