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Opening extract from

Mice

Written by

Gordon Reece

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MICE

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For Joanna

12

My eyes snapped open and I was instantly wide awake. Even though I'd been sunk in the depths of a deep, deep sleep, the unmistakable pig squeal of the fourth stair had reached the part of the brain that never sleeps. I had no doubt what I'd heard, and I had no doubt what it meant: *someone was in the house*.

The fluorescent display of the alarm clock on my bedside table said 3:33.

I could feel my heart pounding in my chest like something with a life of its own, like a rabbit writhing and twisting in a snare that grew tighter the more it struggled. I strained to hear above the booming roar in my temples. My ears probed outside my bedroom door – the landing, the staircase – like invisible guard dogs, constantly sending back information: *silence*, *silence*, *silence*, *there's only silence: we can find nothing*. Could I have been mistaken? But I knew I wasn't. I'd heard the fourth stair scream under a person's weight.

Sure enough, after what seemed like an eternity of waiting there came the groan of another stair, a higher stair: s*omeone was in the house*.

I was paralysed with fear. Since my eyes had opened I hadn't moved a muscle. It was as if a primitive instinct – to keep absolutely still and not make a sound until the danger had passed – had taken control of me. Even my breathing had become so slow, so shallow that it made no sound, and didn't move the quilt the tiniest fraction. I thought about the rounders bat I kept under the bed 'in case of burglars', but I was powerless to reach down to grasp it. Something stronger held me frozen and immobile. *Keep still*, it ordered, *don't make a sound until the danger's passed*.

The footsteps continued up the stairs – louder now, as if the intruder had given up trying to be quiet. I heard a body bump heavily into the cabinet on the landing (*drunk?*) and a voice swearing (*a man*).

I heard him open Mum's bedroom door. I knew that he'd switched her light on, because the thick darkness in my room lightened infinitesimally. I heard Mum's voice. Sleepy. Confused. Frightened. Then the man's voice, a stream of aggressive, guttural grunts that sounded more animal than human. 'Wait,' I clearly heard Mum say. 'My dressing gown.' Then I heard them both walking towards my bedroom.

My door shushed open against the thick nap of the carpet, and my light exploded into white blinding life.

Even though they were both in my bedroom I still didn't move (*keep still, don't make a sound until the danger's passed*). I lay as still and helpless as if my neck had been broken.

Mum said my name to wake me, but I couldn't answer. She said it again louder, closer to my bed. Finally she appeared in my vision. Her pale face was still battered by sleep, her hair wildly disordered in a way that would have been funny in other circumstances, her dressing gown pulled on hastily, its belt hanging loose. She saw that I'd been awake all the time and that I knew exactly what was happening.

'Shelley, darling,' she said, 'don't be frightened. He just wants money. If we do everything he says, he's going to go away and leave us alone.'

I didn't believe her and I could tell from the trembling of her hands and the catch in her voice that she didn't believe it herself. When a cat gets into the mouse hole it doesn't go away leaving the mice unharmed. I knew how this story was going to end. He was going to rape me. He was going to rape Mum. Then he was going to kill us both.

With a tremendous effort, I finally managed to move my left leg to the cold outer edge of the bed. With that, the millennia-old spell was broken and I was able to sit up and reach for my dressing gown.

The burglar was younger than he'd sounded. He was a weedy youth of no more than twenty with a thin weasel face and long black hair that hung in his eyes and coiled around his neck in greasy rats' tails. He wore a scruffy olive-green bomber jacket and filth-encrusted jeans that hung so low on his hips they seemed on the point of falling down.

From five feet away I could smell the stink of alcohol that surrounded him like an invisible mist. He was clearly drunk, but he was *more than drunk*. He was unsteady on his feet and his unhealthy pale face oozed with sweat. He was barely able to stay awake; his eyelids kept drooping, flickering wildly with the effort to remain open. His eyes glazed over and rolled up into his head and he seemed to be on the point of passing out, when he suddenly came to with an ugly jerk of his shoulders, looking all around him as if trying to recollect where he was.

He held a huge knife in his right hand – the type hunters use to gut rabbits.

He stood at the top of the stairs, swaying crazily from side to side like a man on the deck of a storm-tossed ship (*would he fall? Please God, let him fall down the stairs and break his neck!*) but he didn't. He motioned with the knife for Mum and me to go down.

Trembling and terrified, we obeyed him.

I went first, the floorboards ice-cold beneath my bare feet. Below me I could make out the front door at the bottom of the stairs. Outside was the safety of the darkness, a hundred places to hide. If I made a dash for it, could I get out in time? The chain was pulled across. If I fumbled with that . . . and he was right behind Mum with that savage knife.

I stepped off the last stair, and the chance – *our last chance?* – was gone.

He herded us into the lounge and switched on the lights. I was freezing after the warmth of my bed, and began to shiver uncontrollably. Instinctively Mum

wrapped her arms around me and started rubbing me vigorously to warm me up, but my shaking didn't stop. I realized I wasn't shaking with cold. I was shaking with fear.

'Stay here,' he grunted. 'Don't do anything or you'll get this!' and he jabbed the knife violently at Mum, the serrated edge passing just a few inches from her left eye.

He negotiated the half-dozen paces into the dining room with difficulty, as if the floor he walked on was banked sharply at forty-five degrees, and he was evidently relieved when he reached the table and could steady himself against it. Mum and I stood hugging each other in the middle of the lounge, Mum whispering to me over and over again, 'It'll be all right, Shelley, it'll be all right.' I buried my face in her neck and squeezed my eyes tight shut. *Please let this all just be a nightmare*, I prayed, *please say this isn't really happening!*

I could hear him talking incoherently to himself as he rifled through the drawers in the sideboard and the antique writing desk. As his searching grew more frantic, I heard the bowl of potpourri get swept to the floor, the birthday cards slapped into the air like a flock of cardboard birds, the vase of dried flowers shatter into pieces on the parquet. All the time, he kept up a nonsensical, babbling commentary punctuated with fits of childish giggles and explosions of vicious swearing.

'What's he looking for, Mum?' I whispered.

'I don't know, darling. I'm not sure he knows. Don't worry. He'll be gone in a minute.'

Listening to that stream of gibberish coming from

the dining room, I had the sickening realization that the burglar wasn't really *there* with us in Honeysuckle Cottage at all, that he was tripping on whatever cocktail of drink and drugs he'd taken. All this – Mum and me standing shivering in our dressing gowns, the drawers he was casually yanking from the writing desk and emptying onto the floor – for him, all of this was merely a dream. It wasn't real at all. He could stab us with his hunting knife and it would mean nothing to him because we didn't exist, we were just phantoms in a dream, his mind, his reason, was elsewhere – drugged, asleep. And I knew very well what the sleep of reason produced.

I looked up from Mum's shoulder to see him walking towards us, dragging two dining-room chairs with him. He put them back to back and told us to sit down.

'We're gonna play musical chairs,' he said, and burst out laughing as if he'd just made the funniest joke.

'Yeah – that's right,' he said, 'we're gonna play musical chairs. Like in school with the teacher. Laa dee laa dee laa dee laa. Stop! Who's got the chair? I've got the chair! Who's got the chair? I've got the chair! Laa dee laa dee laa dee laa!'

With another wild jag of the knife, he gestured for us to sit down. We reluctantly let go of each other and did what he wanted. I instantly regretted it because now I couldn't see Mum at all – only the fireplace and the piano – and I felt my fear intensify and panic rise in my breast. I closed my eyes and took deep breaths, trying to drive the hysteria back down.

The youth stood just a few feet away to my left, silent, like an actor who's unexpectedly forgotten his lines. His eyelids began to flicker wildly again and his eyes slid upwards until all I could see were the discoloured whites. His head slumped forward. It was almost as though he'd fallen asleep standing up. The knife hung limply in his hand just held by the tips of his fingers.

I stared at him, expecting him to suddenly snap out of it, but he didn't. He stayed immobile, like a clockwork toy that has run itself down. *If I throw myself at him now*, I thought, *right now, the knife will drop harmlessly to the floor and Mum will pick it up*. Without the knife he wasn't a cat in the mouse hole at all – he was only a kitten, and a sick, disorientated kitten at that. If I rushed at him now, when he was off in one of his trances, I could knock the knife from his hand. I could do it. I should do it. I had to do it . . .

But slowly his eyelids unglued themselves, his grey irises with their pencil-point pupils dropped back into place, and he stared directly at me. He smiled vacantly and smacked his chops like someone waking from a deep sleep with a foul taste in their mouth. His grip tightened on the knife. He brought it up to his face and used the back of his hand to wipe away some bubbly dribble that was running down his chin.

I was too late. I was too late again.

'Yeah,' he said slowly, beginning to remember where he was. 'Yeah – we're gonna play musical chairs.'

He groped around in his pocket and pulled out a ragged jumble of rope.