

THE
MOUSE AND
THE
MOTORCYCLE

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THE NEW GUESTS

K eith, the boy in the rumpled shorts and shirt, did not know he was being watched as he entered Room 215 of the Mountain View Inn. Neither did his mother and father, who both looked hot and tired. They had come from Ohio and for five days had driven across plains and deserts and over mountains to the old hotel in the California foothills twenty-five miles from Highway 40.



The fourth person entering Room 215 may have known he was being watched, but he did not care. He was Matt, sixty if he was a day, who at the moment was the bellboy. Matt also replaced worn-out light-bulbs, renewed washers in leaky faucets, carried trays for people who telephoned room service to order food sent to their rooms, and sometimes prevented children

from hitting one another with croquet mallets on the lawn behind the hotel.

Now Matt's right shoulder sagged with the weight of one of the bags he was carrying. "Here you are, Mr. Gridley. Rooms 215 and 216," he said, setting the smaller of the bags on a luggage rack at the foot of the double bed before he opened a door into the next room. "I expect you and Mrs. Gridley will want Room 216. It is a corner room with twin beds and a private bath." He carried the heavy bag into the next room, where he could be heard opening windows. Outside a chipmunk chattered in a pine tree and a chickadee whistled *fee-bee-bee*.

The boy's mother looked critically around Room 215 and whispered, "I think we should drive back to the main highway. There must be a motel with a *Vacancy* sign someplace. We didn't look long enough."

“Not another mile,” answered the father. “I’m not driving another mile on a California highway on a holiday weekend. Did you see the way that truck almost forced us off the road?”

“Dad, did you see those two fellows on motorcycles—” began the boy and stopped, realizing he should not interrupt an argument.

“But this place is so *old*,” protested the boy’s mother. “And we have only three weeks for our whole trip. We had planned to spend the Fourth of July weekend in San Francisco and we wanted to show Keith as much of the United States as we could.”

“San Francisco will have to wait, and this is part of the United States. Besides, this used to be a very fashionable hotel,” said Mr. Gridley. “People came from miles around.”

“Fifty years ago,” said Mrs. Gridley. “And they came by horse and buggy.”

The bellboy returned to Room 215. "The dining room opens at six-thirty, sir. There is Ping-Pong in the game room, TV in the lobby, and croquet on the back lawn. I'm sure you will be very comfortable." Matt, who had seen guests come and go for many years, knew there were two kinds—those who thought the hotel was a dreadful old barn of a place and those who thought it charming and quaint, so quiet and restful.

"Of course we will be comfortable," said Mr. Gridley, dropping some coins into Matt's hand for carrying the bags.

"But this big old hotel is positively spooky." Mrs. Gridley made one last protest. "It is probably full of mice."

Matt opened the window wide. "Mice? Oh no, ma'am. The management wouldn't stand for mice."

"I wouldn't mind a few mice," the boy said, as he looked around the room at the

high ceiling, the knotty pine walls, the carpet so threadbare that many of its roses had almost entirely faded, the one chair with the antimacassar on its back, the washbasin and towel racks in the corner of the room. "I like it here," he announced. "A whole room to myself. Usually I just get a cot in the corner of a motel room."

His mother smiled, relenting. Then she turned to Matt. "I'm sorry. It's just that it was so hot crossing Nevada and we are not used to mountain driving. Back on the highway the traffic was bumper to bumper. I'm sure we shall be very comfortable."

After Matt had gone, closing the door behind him, Mr. Gridley said, "I need a rest before dinner. Four hundred miles of driving and that mountain traffic! It was too much."

"And if we are going to stay for a weekend I had better unpack," said Mrs. Gridley. "At least I'll have a chance to do some drip-drying."

Alone in Room 215 and unaware that he was being watched, the boy began to explore. He got down on his hands and knees and looked under the bed. He leaned out the open window as far as he could and greedily inhaled deep breaths of pine-scented air. He turned the hot and cold water on and off in the washbasin and slipped one of the small bars of paper-wrapped soap into his pocket. Under the window he discovered a knothole in the pine wall down by the floor and, squatting, poked his finger into the hole. When he felt nothing inside he lost interest.

Next Keith opened his suitcase and took out an apple and several small cars—a sedan, a sports car, and an ambulance about six inches long, and a red motorcycle half the length of the cars—which he dropped on the striped bedspread before he bit into the apple. He ate the apple noisily in big chomping bites, and then laid the core on

the bedside table between the lamp and the telephone.

Keith began to play, running his cars up and down the bedspread, pretending that the stripes on the spread were highways and making noises with his mouth—*vroom vroom* for the sports car, *wh-e-e wh-e-e* for the ambulance, and *pb-pb-b-b-b* for the motorcycle, up and down the stripes.

Once Keith stopped suddenly and looked quickly around the room as if he expected to see something or someone, but when he saw nothing unusual he returned to his cars. *Vroom vroom. Bang! Crash!* The sports car hit the sedan and rolled over off the highway stripe. *Pb-pb-b-b-b.* The motorcycle came roaring to the scene of the crash.

“Keith,” his mother called from the next room. “Time to get washed for dinner.”

“OK.” Keith parked his cars in a straight line on the bedside table beside the



telephone, where they looked like a row of real cars only much, much smaller.

The first thing Mrs. Gridley noticed when she and Mr. Gridley came into the room was the apple core on the table. She dropped it with a thunk into the metal

wastebasket beside the table as she gave several quick little sniffs of the air and said, looking perplexed, "I don't care what the bellboy said. I'm sure this hotel has mice."

"I hope so," muttered Keith.