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A SUBJECT FOR A COMPOSITION

Ralph was a hero in the mousehole that night. His admiring relatives gathered around, begging to hear the story of his adventures. Ralph could not help bragging a little as he told the story of his travels, beginning with the search of the second-floor rooms, skipping the part about the teacher trapping him under a drinking glass, and ending with Keith's taking the



aspirin and finally falling asleep.

“But are you sure it really was an aspirin tablet?” Ralph’s mother could always find something to worry about. “Are you sure it wasn’t some other kind of pill?”

“Keith put it on the bedside table and refused to take it until his mother saw it,” explained Ralph. “At first his mother and father got pretty excited and thought he was out of his mind from the fever when he

started telling them there was an aspirin on the table. Then when they saw the pill and could tell from the letters on it that it really was an aspirin they decided the night clerk must have found it and brought it up. They thought the windows rattled so much they did not hear his knock."

"Oh, Ralph, I am so proud of you," said his mother with a sigh of relief while his brothers and sisters and cousins stared at him with shining eyes.

"Good work, Ralph. I didn't think you could do it," said Uncle Lester heartily.

"I feel much better about room service now that we have left an aspirin for a tip," said Ralph's mother. "I feel that at last we have done the right thing."

"Our Ralph is growing up," said Aunt Sissy.

"Yes, Ralph is growing up," agreed his mother with a sad note in her voice. "It's

hard to believe. It seems only yesterday that he was a tiny pink mouse without any hair."

Naturally this embarrassed Ralph, but now that his mother had finally admitted he was growing up, he decided to make the most of this moment. "*Now* can I go down to the first floor by myself?" he asked eagerly.

"We'll see," said his mother, looking worried once more.

"Nonsense," said Uncle Lester. "Of course he may go. Ralph has shown that he can be a very responsible mouse."

"I guess you're right," agreed Ralph's mother nervously.

"Oh, boy!" exclaimed Ralph.

"Tell us again how you climbed down the vine and the owl nearly got you," begged a cousin.

"No, tell us again how the ambulance got stuck in the crack," said another.

"No, tell the part about how you got the dog to bark," pleaded a third.

The only flaw in the evening for Ralph was the fact that he had not found the motorcycle on his travels through the hotel.

Keith slept soundly and the next morning, although he still had a temperature, Ralph was pleased to see he was feeling much better.

"Do you hurt anyplace?" Mrs. Gridley asked anxiously, after she had given her son an aspirin brought by the milkman. "Is your throat sore? Does your stomach ache?"

Keith shook his head. "I just feel sort of tired."

"He's going to be all right. He must have picked up a bug someplace," said Mrs. Gridley to her husband. "A day in bed with plenty of fluids and he'll be on his feet again."

Mr. Gridley nodded. "Do you feel like eating any breakfast?" he asked Keith. "We

can order something for you from room service."

Keith brightened. "Can I really have something sent up from room service?" he asked, and when his father assured him he could, he slumped back into the pillow. "But I'm not hungry."

"Some orange juice would be good for you," suggested his mother.

"All right," agreed Keith, and then added as if he suddenly had an inspiration, "and bacon and toast and jelly."

"Your appetite seems to have come back in a hurry," remarked Mr. Gridley, as he picked up the telephone and asked to be connected with room service to order, he thought, breakfast for his son.

As soon as the adults had gone, Ralph popped out into the room.

"Hi," said Keith. "Thanks a lot for the aspirin. It really helped."

"That's all right," answered Ralph modestly.

"Where did you find it?" Keith was curious to know.

"Under a dresser down on the first floor."

"The first floor!" Keith could not believe it. "How did you manage to get it up here?"

Once more Ralph told the story of his night's adventure, skipping the part about the drinking glass, but making it sound as if he had narrowly escaped the horny talons of the owl as he traveled down the vine.

"Golly!" Keith was amazed at Ralph's story. "You know what? You're a pretty smart mouse. And a brave one, too."

"It was nothing," said Ralph in an off-hand manner.

"Nothing! It was plenty. You risked your life!"

The boy's admiration and gratitude made Ralph feel even prouder of what he had done. "I parked your ambulance out in the

hall," he said, wanting Keith to know how responsible he was. "Your folks will probably see it and bring it in when they come back."

"That reminds me. You didn't happen to see my motorcycle anyplace, did you?" Keith's question was unexpected.

"Well, no, I didn't." Ralph suddenly felt less proud of himself. "But I didn't have much time to look."

"Yeah, I know." Keith was sympathetic. "I just wondered. . . ."

A knock at the door sent Ralph scurrying to the knothole.

"Come in," called Keith.

Matt entered with a tray. "Here you are and here is your ambulance. I found it out in the hall," he said as he set the tray across Keith's knees. "Sorry to see you're under the weather."

"Thank you. I'll be all right." Keith handed Matt a coin his father had left for a

tip. "And thanks for bringing in my ambulance."

Matt pocketed the coin. "Thank you," he said, "and, by the way, this doesn't happen to be yours, does it?" He pulled the little motorcycle out of his pocket.



Ralph was so excited he almost fell out of the knothole.

"Hey!" Keith sat up straight, rocking the orange juice on his tray. "It sure is. Where did you find it?"

"In a hamper of linen that had been chewed by mice. Or by a mouse. It fell out when the housekeeper was showing us the damage that had been done. I picked it up before anyone noticed it."

"Gee, thanks. Thanks a lot." Keith accepted the motorcycle and set it on his tray. "It's my favorite. I didn't like losing it."

"I wonder how it got into that hamper of linen?" mused Matt.

Keith grinned but said nothing.

Old Matt rubbed his chin and stared at the ceiling. "I don't suppose a certain irresponsible mouse happened to ride it into a pile of sheets and pillowcases and get tangled up and dumped into the hamper."

Keith tried not to laugh. "I don't know

any irresponsible mice," he said. "Only one responsible mouse. Say, how did you guess?"

"There isn't much around this hotel that escapes my attention," said Matt. "I saw that mouse out in the hall with the little motorcycle. I imagine he's a regular speed demon."

Ralph could no longer stay out of the conversation. "I'm fast but I'm careful. I haven't had an accident yet," he boasted, and added hastily, recalling his fall into the wastebasket, "at least not since I learned to ride the motorcycle."

"If there is anything I can't stand, it's a cheeky mouse," remarked Matt good-naturedly. "What do you call getting tangled up in a lot of linen?"

"What I mean is, I didn't crack up in the motorcycle," said Ralph with dignity.

"He's not cheeky," defended Keith. "He's brave. You—you aren't going to tell

the management about him, are you?"

"What's the use?" said Matt. "If they get rid of these mice more will move in. Anyway, he's a cute little fellow. It cheers me up just to think of him tearing around on a little motorcycle."

If only I could, thought Ralph.

There followed an unusually pleasant day for the mice. Keith stuffed the bacon and toast and jelly through the knothole. The mice feasted on bacon and jelly before the ants could get at them and stored the toast against the rapidly approaching time when Keith must leave the hotel. They slept all morning while Keith alternately napped and played with his cars. For lunch they enjoyed peanut butter sandwiches again.

Ralph did not sleep well that afternoon. He found himself thinking of the tantalizing glimpse he had had of the ground floor and of all the opportunities it offered

mice—crumbs in the dining room, leftovers in the kitchen, scraps in the garbage. He lay daydreaming on a pile of shredded Kleenex. He could see himself on the first floor pilfering crumbs in the dining room at night after the guests were in bed. And from the dining room he would go to the kitchen right past the night clerk, who was sure to be asleep. If only he could make the trip on the motorcycle. . . .

The thought of the motorcycle put an end to Ralph's daydream and made sleep impossible. After tossing about on his bed of Kleenex, he got up and poked his head out the knothole. Keith was awake, lying back on the pillows with his cars beside him. He smiled wanly at Ralph.

"How are you feeling?" asked Ralph.

"Sort of tired," answered Keith.

Ralph climbed through the hole. "Where are your folks?"

"They went out for a little while. They'll be back. I'm supposed to take a nap."

"Are you going to?" asked Ralph.

"I'd rather talk to you." Keith leaned over and set the motorcycle on the floor. "Want to ride it?" he asked.

"Do I want to ride it!" Ralph could scarcely believe he had heard correctly. "You mean you'll let me? After the way I lost it for you?"

"You proved you could be responsible when you brought me the aspirin," explained Keith. "You're more grown up."

"Thanks," said Ralph modestly.

"I guess mice grow up faster than boys." Keith sounded as though he longed to grow as rapidly as a mouse.

"You grow a little bit every day," Ralph said, as he removed his crash helmet from its hiding place behind the curtain.

"I guess you're right," agreed Keith. "My

dad measures me every six months against the doorjamb of our kitchen back in Ohio, and each mark he makes is higher than the last, but I never feel myself growing."

"You wait long enough and you will be a grown-up." Ralph felt as if he had said something very wise as he slipped the rubber band on his crash helmet around his whiskers.

"I guess so." Keith slumped back on the pillows. "But it takes so long."

"I grew up, didn't I?" asked Ralph. "You said yourself I had become a responsible mouse."

"Yes, you did," said Keith thoughtfully. "I guess that's part of the secret. Just getting bigger isn't enough. You have to learn things like not taking off down a steep hill on a bicycle when you aren't used to hand brakes. Stuff like that."

Ralph walked with a slight swagger to

the motorcycle, grabbed the handgrips, and threw his leg across the seat. He remembered to pick up his tail before he started. *Pb-pb-b-b-b*. He took off across the carpet and circled the room, covering the rough parts under the dresser and chair and coming to a halt beside the bed. "She has good balance on a rough road," said Ralph with authority. "She's a mighty fine machine."

"Say, Ralph," said Keith, suddenly sitting up. "How would you like to come with me when we leave the hotel?"

"Come with you!" Ralph was stunned. He had expected to live and die in the Mountain View Inn, and now he was being offered the opportunity for travel that he had dreamed of.

"Yes. Come with me to San Francisco and then back to Ohio."

Ralph's first thought was of the motorcycle. If he went with Keith he would not

have to be separated from the motorcycle.

Keith must have sensed Ralph's thoughts because he said, "You could ride the motorcycle every day."

Ralph was silent. He had begun to think of other things—his family, the permission he had earned to visit the ground floor, Keith's family and how they might feel about a mouse.

"Come on, Ralph," said Keith. "You could travel in my pocket."

"Your mother doesn't care for mice," Ralph pointed out.

"Not running around loose," agreed Keith. "But she let me keep a couple of white mice once. I still have their cage at home. You would be very comfortable in it."

"Comfortable in a cage?" Ralph was horrified. "No, thank you."

"Aw, come on—"

"Would you like to be shut up in a cage?" demanded Ralph.

"Well, no, but—"

"Neither would I," said Ralph. "Especially now that I can finally go to the ground floor."

In his disappointment Keith slumped back on the pillows once more. "I guess I knew you really wouldn't want to come," he said. "I understand."

"I sure will hate to see this motorcycle leave," said Ralph, and added hastily, "and you, too, of course."

The boy and the mouse were silent. Both were thinking of their wishes and their regrets that their wishes could not come true.

Keith rolled over on his side and propped his head up on his fist. "Would you like to keep the motorcycle?" he asked.

"Keep it! Me?"

"Sure," said Keith. "I can save up my allowance and buy another one when we get back to Ohio."

"You really mean it?" Ralph could

scarcely contain his excitement. "Keep it for my very own?"

"Of course."

"How come?" Ralph wanted to know.

"I just like to think of you riding it," said Keith. "You know—if you grew up enough to be trusted with a mouse-sized motorcycle, maybe someday I could earn a big one."

The excitement drained out of Ralph. "I can't. I don't have any place to keep it. It's too big to go through the knothole, and I couldn't hide it behind the curtain forever because I've heard that after Labor Day when there aren't so many tourists they take the curtains down to be cleaned."

"That is a problem," agreed Keith. "There must be someplace in a big hotel like this where you could keep a motorcycle."

Ralph sat on the motorcycle thinking as hard as he could. In the closet? He couldn't

get it out when the door was closed. Under the bed? Eventually it would be found.

"How about downstairs?" suggested Keith. "I could carry it down for you before we leave. There must be a good hiding place down there someplace."

"There's that big old clock my ancestor ran up," said Ralph thoughtfully. "Nobody ever cleans under it, but frankly I don't care to have it striking over my head."

Keith thought awhile. "How about that big television set in the lobby?" he asked. "The noise shouldn't bother you because you would only go under it at night when everyone was asleep."

"Yes!" Ralph was excited. "That's a perfect garage. I saw it when I got the aspirin. The legs are just high enough for the motorcycle but not quite high enough for a vacuum cleaner attachment."

"Then it's settled!" said Keith, and then

added rather sternly, Ralph thought, "But first you must ask your mother."

Ralph dismounted and ran to the knot-hole. He was gone several minutes before he returned to announce in triumph, "She says I can keep the motorcycle if I promise to drive carefully and wear my crash helmet every single time I ride it."

"Swell!" Keith was just as excited as Ralph. "When we check out I'll hide it for you while my folks are busy paying the bill."

"I can't thank you enough." Ralph fastened his crash helmet once more. "I never thought I would have a motorcycle of my very own."

Keith lay back on the pillow and smiled at the mouse mounting the motorcycle. "It will be fun thinking of you riding around that big old lobby when I'm back in Ohio this winter going to school. And when the teacher asks us to write a composition about

our summer vacation I can write about meeting a brave mouse named Ralph who rode a little motorcycle. I'll tell about your bringing the aspirin except I'll have to call it a pill because I can't spell *aspirin*. Of course the teacher won't believe it, but she'll probably say I show imagination."

Ralph felt proud to think he was going to be written about in a composition in far-off Ohio. *Pb-pb-b-b-b*. He grabbed his tail, gunned the motor, and took off, heading for the threadbare part of the carpet that made such a good speedway. Round and round he sped, faster and faster until his whiskers blew back and he was filled with the joy of speed. He longed to wave to Keith, but he realized a good driver must keep both paws on the handgrips. He glanced up and noticed that Keith's eyes were closed. The boy had fallen asleep with a smile on his face.

Ralph dragged his heels to brake the motorcycle. Quietly he parked it beside the bed and quietly he removed his crash helmet and hid it behind the curtain. He did not want to disturb the sleeping boy.

Ralph could wait to ride the motorcycle. It was his to keep.

