

## 2

### THE MOTORCYCLE

**E**xcept for one terrifying moment when the boy had poked his finger through the mousehole, a hungry young mouse named Ralph eagerly watched everything that went on in Room 215. At first he was disappointed at the size of the boy who was to occupy the room. A little child, preferably two or even three children, would have been better. Little messy children were

always considerate about leaving crumbs on the carpet. Oh well, at least these people did not have a dog. If there was one thing Ralph disliked, it was a snoopy dog.

Next Ralph felt hopeful. Medium-sized boys could almost always be counted on to leave a sticky candy bar wrapper on the floor or a bag of peanuts on the bedside table, where Ralph could reach them by climbing up the telephone cord. With a boy this size, the food, though not apt to be plentiful, was almost sure to be of good quality.

The third emotion felt by Ralph was joy when the boy laid the apple core by the telephone. This was followed by despair when the mother dropped the core into the metal wastebasket. Ralph knew that anything at the bottom of a metal wastebasket was lost to a mouse forever.

A mouse lives not by crumbs alone and so Ralph experienced still another emotion;

this time food was not the cause of it. Ralph was eager, excited, curious, and impatient all at once. The emotion was so strong it made him forget his empty stomach. It was caused by those little cars, especially that motorcycle and the *pb-pb-b-b-b* sound the boy made. That sound seemed to satisfy something within Ralph, as if he had been waiting all his life to hear it.

*Pb-pb-b-b-b* went the boy. To the mouse the sound spoke of highways and speed, of distance and danger, and whiskers blown back by the wind.

The instant the family left the room to go to dinner, Ralph scurried out of the mousehole and across the threadbare carpet to the telephone cord, which came out of a hole in the floor beside the bedside table.

“Ralph!” scolded his mother from the mousehole. “You stay away from that telephone cord!” Ralph’s mother was a

great worrier. She worried because their hotel was old and run-down and because so many rooms were often empty with no careless guests to leave crumbs behind for mice. She worried about the rumor that their hotel was to be torn down when the new highway came through. She worried about her children finding aspirin tablets. Ralph's father had tried to carry an aspirin tablet in his cheek pouch, the aspirin had dissolved with unexpected suddenness, and Ralph's father had been poisoned. Since then no member of the family would think of touching an aspirin tablet, but this did not prevent Ralph's mother from worrying.

Most of all Ralph's mother worried about Ralph. She worried because he was a reckless mouse, who stayed out late in the daytime when he should have been home safe in bed. She worried when Ralph climbed the curtain to sit on the windowsill

to watch the chipmunk in the pine tree outside and the cars in the parking lot below. She worried because Ralph wanted to go exploring down the hall instead of traveling under the floorboards like a sensible mouse. Heaven only knew what dangers he might meet in the hall—maids, bellboys, perhaps even cats. Or what was worse, vacuum cleaners. Ralph's mother had a horror of vacuum cleaners.

Ralph, who was used to his mother's worries, got a good running start and was already halfway up the telephone cord.

"Remember your Uncle Victor!" his mother called after him.

Ralph seemed not to hear. He climbed the cord up to the telephone, jumped down, and ran around to the row of cars. There it was on the end—the motorcycle! Ralph stared at it and then walked over and kicked a tire. Close up the motorcycle looked even

better than he expected. It was new and shiny and had a good set of tires. Ralph walked all the way around it, examining the pair of chromium mufflers and the engine and the hand clutch. It even had a little license plate so it would be legal to ride it.

“Boy!” said Ralph to himself, his whiskers quivering with excitement. “Boy, oh, boy!” Feeling that this was an important moment in his life, he took hold of the handgrips. They felt good and solid beneath his paws. Yes, this motorcycle was a good machine all right. He could tell by the feel. Ralph threw a leg over the motorcycle and sat jauntily on the plastic seat. He even bounced up and down. The seat was curved just right to fit a mouse.

But how to start the motorcycle? Ralph did not know. And even if he did know how to start it, he could not do much riding up here on the bedside table. He considered

pushing the motorcycle off onto the floor, but he did not want to risk damaging such a valuable machine.

Ralph bounced up and down on the seat a couple more times and looked around for some way to start the motorcycle. He pulled at a lever or two but nothing happened. Then a terrible thought spoiled his pleasure. This was only a toy. It would not run at all.



Ralph, who had watched many children in Room 215, had picked up a lot of information about toys. He had seen a boy from Cedar Rapids throw his model airplane on the floor because he could not make its plastic parts fit properly. A little girl had burst into tears and run sobbing to her mother when her doll's arm had come out of its socket. And then there was that nice boy, the potato chip nibbler, who stamped his foot because the batteries kept falling out of his car.

But this toy could not be like all those other toys he had seen. It looked too perfect with its wire spokes in its wheels and its pair of shiny chromium exhaust pipes. It would not be right if it did not run. It would not be *fair*. A motorcycle that looked as real as this one *had* to run. The secret of making it run must be perfectly simple if only Ralph had someone to show him what it was.



Ralph was not satisfied just sitting on the motorcycle. Ralph craved action. After all, what was a motorcycle for if it wasn't action? Who needed motorcycle riding lessons? Not Ralph! He tried pushing himself along with his feet. This was not nearly fast enough, but it was better than nothing. He moved his feet faster along the tabletop and then lifted them up while he coasted. Feeling braver, he bent low over the handlebars and worked his feet still faster toward the edge of the bedside table. When he worked up a little speed he would coast around the corner. He scabbled his feet on the tabletop to gain momentum. In a split second he would steer to the left—

At that moment the bell on the telephone rang half a ring, so close that it seemed to pierce the middle of Ralph's bones. It rang just that half ring, as if the girl at the switchboard realized she had rung the wrong

room and had jerked out the cord before the ring was finished.

That half a ring was enough. It shattered Ralph's nerves and terrified him so that he forgot all about steering. It jumbled his



thoughts until he forgot to drag his heels for brakes. He was so terrified he let go of the handgrips. The momentum of the motorcycle carried him forward, over the edge of the table. Down, down through space tumbled Ralph with the motorcycle. He tried to straighten out, to turn the fall into a leap, but the motorcycle got in his way. He grabbed in vain at the air with both paws. There was nothing to clutch, nothing to save him, only the empty air. For a fleeting instant he thought of his poor old Uncle Victor. That was the instant the motorcycle landed with a crash in the metal wastebasket.

Ralph fell in a heap beside the motorcycle and lay still.