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A PEANUT BUTTER SANDWICH

“**I** told you to be careful,” scolded Keith, when his parents had gone to dress and Ralph had crawled down his arm into his hand.

“It wasn’t my fault the door blew shut.” Ralph jumped from the hand to the bedspread. Though Keith was a friendly boy, even a generous one, Ralph still did not like the feel of skin against his paws. It must be

terrible to go through life without fur and such a nuisance, having to wear clothes that had to be washed and drip-dried. Ralph knew all about drip-drying. Many were the drops of water from shirts and slippers that he had dodged going in and out of his mouse-hole.

"You didn't have to stay out so long," Keith pointed out as he began to dress.

"What's the use of having a motorcycle if you can't go tearing around staying out late?" Ralph asked reasonably.

"You don't have a motorcycle," said Keith. "I just let you use mine. And you better be careful. I like that motorcycle and I don't want anything to happen to it."

"I'll take care of it," promised Ralph, somewhat chastened. "I don't want anything to happen to it either."

"It's going to be harder to get a chance to ride it now that my mother has seen you,"

said Keith. "She's a terribly good housekeeper and she's sure to complain to the management."

"Speaking of breakfast, you people are too tidy," complained Ralph. "I'm not getting enough to eat around here. You don't leave any crumbs."

"I never thought of it," said Keith. "What would you like to eat?"

Ralph was astounded. This was the first time in his life anyone had asked him what he would like to eat. It had always been a question of what he could get his paws on. "You mean I have a choice?" he asked, incredulous.

"Sure," said the boy. "All I have to do is order it when we go down to breakfast and then bring you some."

Ralph had to take time to think. After a diet of zwieback and graham crackers provided by little children, bits of candy and

an occasional peanut or apple core left by medium-sized children, or a crust of toast and a dab of jam left by an adult who had ordered breakfast sent up from room service, the possibilities of choosing his own meal were almost too much.

"I know what I'd like," Ralph said at last, "but I don't know what you call it. Once some people who said they were almost out of money stayed in these rooms. They had four children, all of them hungry, and they couldn't afford to go to the dining room so they got some bread and spread it with something brown out of a jar and put some more bread on top of that. They whispered all the time they were eating, because they didn't want the maid or bellboy to know they were having a meal in their room. Afterwards they all got down on their hands and knees and picked up every single crumb on the carpet so no one would guess they

had eaten in their rooms. It was a great disappointment. It smelled so good. Like peanuts only better."

The boy laughed. "It was a peanut butter sandwich. Sure, I'll bring you a peanut butter sandwich. Or part of one. I'll eat part of it myself. It'll be kind of a funny breakfast, but I won't mind that."

"Where will you leave it?" asked Ralph. Keith thought a minute. "Where do you live?" he asked.

"In the knothole under the window."

"No kidding!" Keith laughed. "That's the hole I poked my finger in last night."

"I'll say you did," said Ralph. "Scared me out of a year's growth. Nobody has ever guessed it's a mousehole because it's a knothole instead of a chewed hole."

"I tell you what," said Keith. "I'll bring up part of a peanut butter sandwich and poke it through the knothole."

"Just like room service!" Ralph could not have been more pleased with the suggestion. "Uh—what about the motorcycle?" he asked. "Where are you going to leave that?"

"In my suitcase, I guess."

"Aw, come on," pleaded Ralph. "Have a heart. Leave it someplace where I can get it while you're out during the day."

"You're supposed to be in your mouse-hole asleep, not riding around in the daylight where people can see you."

"Well, gee whiz, can't a fellow even look at it?" asked Ralph. "I bet you like to look at big motorcycles yourself."

"Yes, I do," admitted the boy. "Well—I'll leave it back under the bed like I said, but you promise not to ride it until after dark."

"Scout's honor." Ralph jumped off the bed and ran off to the knothole.

Ralph's home was furnished with a clutter of things people drop on the floor of a

hotel room—bits of Kleenex, hair, ravelings. His mother was always planning to straighten it out, but she never got around to it. She was always too busy fussing and worrying. Now, as Ralph expected, she was dividing Ry-Krisp crumbs among his squeaky bunch of little brothers and sisters while she waited to scold him.

“Ralph, if I have told you once, I have told you a thousand times—” she began.

“Guess what!” interrupted Ralph in an attempt to change the subject. “Somebody in 215 is going to bring us a real peanut butter sandwich!”

“Ralph!” cried his frightened mother. “You haven’t been associating with *people*!”

“Aw, he’s just a boy,” said Ralph, deciding to keep the complete story of the dangers and the glories of the past night to himself.

“He wouldn’t hurt us. He likes mice.”

“But he’s a *person*,” said his mother.



"That doesn't mean he has to be bad," said Ralph. "Just like Pop used to say, people shouldn't say all mice are timid just because some mice are. Or that all mice play when the cat's away just because some do."

"Just the same, Ralph," said his mother. "I do wish you would be more careful

whom you associate with. I am so afraid you'll fall in with the wrong sort of friends."

"I'm growing up," said Ralph. "I'm getting too old to hang around a mouse nest all the time. I want to go out and see the world. I want to go down on the ground floor and see the kitchen and the dining room and the storeroom and the garbage cans out back."

"Oh, Ralph," cried his mother. "Not the ground floor. Not all the way down there. You aren't old enough."

"Yes, I am," said Ralph stoutly.

"There's no telling what you might run into down there—mousetraps, cats, poison. Why, out by the garbage cans you might even be seen by an owl."

"I don't care," said Ralph. "Someday I'm going downstairs."

"But think of the owls, Ralph," implored his mother. "We moved into the hotel because of the owls. It was after your Uncle

Leroy disappeared and his bones were found in an owl pellet—”

The mother mouse's plea was interrupted by the sound of Keith returning to Room 215. “Now you'll see,” said Ralph to his mother and waited, anxious lest his friend let him down.

Sure enough, Keith came to the knot-hole. “Psst!” he whispered. “Here it is. The waitress thought I was crazy, ordering a peanut butter sandwich along with my cornflakes for breakfast, but here it is.” He stuffed half a sandwich a bit at a time into the hole, where Ralph seized the pieces and pulled them all the way through. “Listen, we're going to be gone most of the day. The dining room is packing us a picnic lunch, and we're going to drive along some of the back roads and visit some old mining towns.”

“Thanks a lot!” Ralph managed to say

with his mouth watering. "Have fun."

"See you tonight," said Keith. "Have a good day's sleep."

Ralph's mother could not help being impressed by the sight of that peanut butter sandwich. "Just like room service," she marveled. "Why, it's a peanut butter and *jelly* sandwich and it even has butter in it."

"I told you he would bring it." Ralph could not help boasting, even though his mouth was full.

After sharing his feast with his squeaky little brothers and sisters, all of whom had trouble with peanut butter sticking to their teeth, Ralph curled up on a heap of shredded Kleenex and took a good long nap. When he awoke refreshed, his first thought was of the motorcycle. He wondered if Keith really had remembered to leave it under the bed. He yawned and stretched and left by way of the knothole.

Room 215 was just as Ralph had last seen

it. The bed had not been made and there were no fresh towels by the washbasin. Ralph ducked under the sheets and blankets that had tumbled off one side of the bed, and there in the dim light he caught the gleam of chromium exhaust pipes. Keith had trusted him after all! He walked across the carpet and took hold of the handgrips once more. They felt just right in his paws and he longed to be off, speeding around the threadbare spots on the carpet, but a promise was a promise. Keith had kept his promise about the peanut butter sandwich; Ralph would keep his about not riding the motorcycle in the daytime. He tried to satisfy himself by walking around the motorcycle in the dim light under the bed, admiring all over again the sleek design of the machine.

Ralph was lost in admiration and day-dreams of speed and power when suddenly the door opened and the maid entered. It

was too late to make a dash for the mousehole. The maid stripped the blankets and sheets from the beds, shedding unwelcome light on Ralph and the motorcycle. Her feet in white sneakers moved lightly as she gathered up the sheets and pillowcases and towels and dropped them with a soft plop beside the open door.

The next thing Ralph knew, he was hearing familiar and dreaded footsteps coming down the hall, steps he had learned to fear when he was a tiny mouse. It was the head housekeeper, the woman who was in charge of all the maids in the hotel. He recognized her steps and he recognized her shoes—stout, sensible black oxfords. Nothing was ever clean enough for the head housekeeper, and Ralph's whole family lived in dread lest she discover their mousehole. Now he held his breath, hoping she would go on down the hall, but no, she stepped into Room 215.

"Good morning, Margery." The housekeeper spoke crisply to the maid. "Be sure you clean 215 and 216 very thoroughly this morning. There has been a complaint from the guests. They suspect mice."

"Yes, ma'am," said the maid.

"Look behind all the drawers," continued the housekeeper, "and in the corners of the closets. Please report any evidence of mice. And be sure you vacuum under the beds. You have been getting careless lately." With that she walked briskly down the hall.

"Old grouch," muttered the maid, as she reached into the hall for something that produced a sound that struck terror into Ralph's heart.

It was the clang of vacuum cleaner attachments banging together.