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THE VACUUM CLEANER

From his position under the bed Ralph watched the tank of the vacuum cleaner being dragged in from the hall and listened to the clash and clang of the attachments as the maid connected a long metal tube to the nozzle at the end of the hose and fastened a carpet-cleaning part to the end of the tube. He heard her humming to herself as she plugged in the deadly machine and began to work it back and forth across the carpet.

It's nice she's so happy, thought Ralph bitterly, as he watched the hungry machine devour dust and lint that lay in its path.

The maid's feet in white sneakers moved across the room until, without bothering to bend down to see where she was cleaning, she shoved the attachment under the bed. It slid closer and closer to Ralph. To be on the safe side he pushed the motorcycle farther from the reach of the machine, but he dared not take his eyes off the attachment for even an instant. He shuddered as he watched it gobble a dust mouse, but even as he shuddered he was fascinated by the power of the motor.

The maid began to sing. "I'll give to you a paper of pins, for that's the way my love begins." The attachment fell off the end of the long tube, but the maid, whose thoughts were elsewhere, did not notice. Now Ralph could feel the machine suck in its breath

and knew he was in danger of being inhaled along with the dust mice.

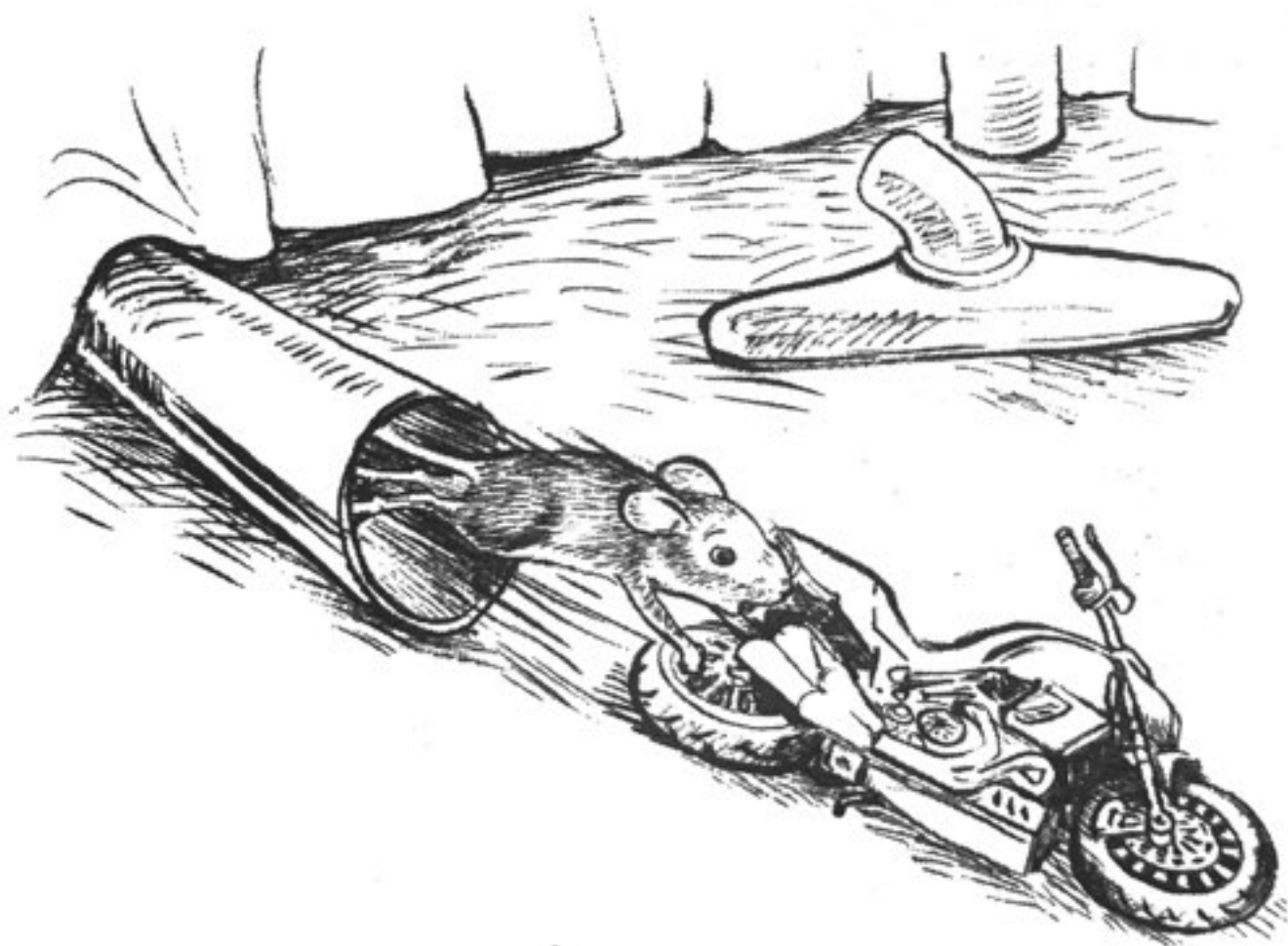
Recklessly the maid pushed the open end of the tube back and forth any old way. There was no guessing which way it would go next. Ralph had to run with the motorcycle to avoid that terrifying hole at the end of the tube. He ran to the right, he ran to the left, and still the maid pushed the tube around, unaware that the attachment had fallen off.

Suddenly the maid threw down the tube but did not turn off the motor. The tube landed with a bump and a bounce, and before Ralph realized what was happening the awful machine had inhaled his tail and he felt himself being pulled by suction across the carpet.

"Help!" he could not keep from squeaking, but no one heard him above the roar of the machine. He just managed to catch the rear wheel of the motorcycle as he was

sucked along the carpet. He hung on with all his strength. The machine, which was strong enough to suck up a mouse, was not strong enough to suck up a mouse and a motorcycle. Ralph lay there on his stomach, hanging on for dear life and feeling his whiskers and fur swept back toward the machine.

From his position on his stomach Ralph could see the girl standing in front of the



dresser. She was smiling at herself in the mirror and arranging her hair, dreaming, no doubt, of the busboy. Ralph despaired. There was no telling how long she would stand there in that silly way. With the vacuum cleaner motor making so much noise, the housekeeper was sure to think she was busy working.

Ralph felt his paws beginning to slip. He did not know how much longer he could hold out against the machine. He had to think of something and think of it fast. With every bit of strength he had left in his body, he clung to the wheels of the motorcycle with his left paw while he moved his right paw up to the exhaust pipe. If he could just manage to pull himself along until he could get on the motorcycle . . .

Bit by bit, hand over hand, Ralph dragged himself forward along the exhaust pipe. He knew he was making progress

when he could see part of his tail once more. He reached back and yanked his tail out of the tube only to have it sucked in again. Ralph was far from being out of danger.

"I'll give to you the keys to my heart," the maid sang to herself before the mirror, now pulling her hair behind her ears, now piling it on top of her head, oblivious to the desperate struggle under the bed.

Once, Ralph's paw slipped from the exhaust pipe and he thought he was a goner until he caught the rear wheel in time to save himself. Slowly he moved forward until his entire tail was free. Things were easier when he could brace his hind foot against the spokes of the rear wheel. Slowly he rose, clinging to the machine, until he was able to grasp the handgrips and throw his leg over the seat.

Ralph felt considerably safer sitting on

the motorcycle and very much pleased with himself for having outwitted the vacuum cleaner. He was quite sure by now that the maid would never bother to look under the bed. He tried to move forward, propelling the cycle with his feet, but he found the suction from the motor behind him was too strong. This made him wonder if the motor on Keith's cycle was stronger than the pull of the machine behind him. The more Ralph thought about it, the more important it seemed to him to find out.

No, I won't. Yes, I will, Ralph argued with himself. He had promised not to ride in the daytime. Yes, but Keith did not know he would have a chance to see which was stronger, the motorcycle or the vacuum cleaner. Keith would be interested, wouldn't he? Wouldn't any boy? Riding the motorcycle would not be reckless. It would be an important experiment. Motorcycle versus

vacuum cleaner—which would be the winner? Ralph had to find out.

The maid turned abruptly from the mirror. Her feet in sneakers moved across the floor toward the electric outlet. If she disconnected the vacuum cleaner there would be no experiment. If Ralph was going to pit one motor against the other, he had to do it now. He would never have another chance.

Pb-pb-b-b-b. Ralph picked up his tail and started the motor. Without taking time to let it warm up, he gunned it with all the breath he could inhale. The motorcycle got off to a faster start than Ralph expected, so fast that Ralph lost control. He shot out from under the bed just as the vacuum cleaner died with a long drawn-out groan.

Suddenly everything went white and Ralph found himself bumping along in a strange ghostly place all white and made of cloth that seemed to be closing in on him

from every direction. Ralph had ridden straight into a pillowcase thrown on the heap of laundry the maid had dropped on the floor, and the opening of the pillowcase had fallen shut behind him.

Ralph had no idea which way was out. He dismounted from the motorcycle and beat at the cloth with his fists, but everywhere he struck it was soft and yielding. He stamped his feet only to have the cloth give softly and silently beneath him.

He began to wade through the pillowcase, tugging the motorcycle along behind him while he wondered why he had thought it so important to test the motorcycle against the vacuum cleaner. The light, filtered through unknown layers of cloth, was dim, and he sank to his knees in bed linen with every step. When he came to a seam he knew he had been wading in the wrong direction.

"Drat," muttered Ralph. He turned, still dragging the motorcycle, and tried to retrace his footsteps only to find he had no idea which way he had come. There were no landmarks. The clouds of cloth were white, billowy, and yielding in all directions. "Double drat!" He stamped his foot, only to find himself sinking deeper into the linen.

From the swishing sounds he could hear outside, Ralph knew the maid must be unfolding clean sheets over the bed. He plodded on, dragging the motorcycle, without direction and with very little hope.

"He promised to buy me a bunch of blue ribbons," sang the maid, "to tie up my bonnie brown hair."

Down the hall a door opened. Ralph heard a muffled "Wuf!" and in a moment the click of a small dog's toenails on the bare floor at the edge of the hall carpet, followed by sniffing that was dangerously close.

The little terrier began to bark. "I know you're in there!" he yipped. "Stick out your tongue and waggle your fingers at me, will you? You just wait!" Paws began to scrape at the sheets and pillowcases as if the dog were trying to dig a hole.

Ralph decided it was wiser not to talk back to the dog. He huddled, scarcely breathing, against the motorcycle.

"Well, hello, you cute little thing," said the maid, revealing to Ralph that she was even sillier than he had thought. As if there was anything cute about a terrier that could scarcely see through his own hair.

The dog went on yapping, a bit self-consciously, Ralph thought, now that he knew he was being admired by the maid. A man's steps came thumping down the hall. "Stop your racket, you pesky mutt," said the owner's voice, and Ralph knew when the barks suddenly came from above him



that the dog had been snatched up.

"Let me down and I'll dig him out," yapped the dog as he was carried away. "Just let me down for one minute and I'll show you!"

Suddenly Ralph felt himself being tumbled about in the pillowcase. He did not even have to think what to do—he automatically grabbed for the motorcycle and held on with all his strength. Even though he had been tipped upside down with his feet in the air, Ralph knew he was being lifted up inside the bundle of bed linen and carried down the hall. He lay still, his front paws locked around the front wheel of the motorcycle, waiting to see what would happen next. The maid walked a short distance to what Ralph judged to be the linen room, and there she dumped her armload of bedding before she went off to clean another room.

Ralph was deep in the hamper where no light filtered through at all. These sheets and pillowcases were on their way to the laundry, and since he had no wish to be laundered, any more than he had wished to be thrown out with the trash, there was

only one thing for him to do. Start chewing. Ralph ripped into the pillowcase with his sharp teeth and in no time he had made a ragged hole, which he crawled through. When he tried to pull the motorcycle after him, he discovered the hole was too small. He had to stop and chew it bigger before he could pull the machine along with him.

Ralph chewed through another layer of cloth and then another as he worked his way upward, each time enlarging the hole for the motorcycle. His jaws began to ache and still another layer of cloth lay ahead, this time a damp bath towel, which would make slow chewing.

Ralph was forced to make a decision. Did he want to save his life or did he want to be carried off to the laundry with the motorcycle? There was only one answer. He wanted to save his life. He must abandon the motorcycle.

With aching jaws Ralph chewed onward and upward, moving faster now that he was making mouse-sized holes instead of motorcycle-sized holes. The bath towel had left an unpleasant furry taste in his mouth. Gradually light began to filter through the cloth until finally, when Ralph thought he could not force his jaws to close on one more mouthful of fiber, he emerged into daylight at the top of the hamper.

“Whew!” Ralph gasped, rubbing his aching jaws and wading across the sheets to the edge of the hamper. He leaped lightly to the floor and, hugging the baseboard, scurried down the hall to Room 215, where he flattened himself and squeezed under the door. Safe but exhausted and filled with remorse at the loss of Keith’s motorcycle, Ralph dragged himself off to the mousehole to catch up on the sleep he should have had that day.