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A FAMILY REUNION

The next thing Ralph knew, his mother was shaking him by the shoulder. "Wake up," she said. "Ralph, wake up. Room service has brought us another meal."

"Room service?" Ralph rubbed his eyes, not believing what he had heard. "Room service has brought *our* dinner?"

"Yes, a real feast. A whole blueberry muffin and a chocolate-chip cookie," said

Ralph's mother. "Get up. We are having family reunion."

It all came back to Ralph. "Oh, room service," he said, understanding at last. "You mean the boy. Keith."

"He is room service to me." Ralph's mother sounded happy and carefree.

Ralph sat up. Already his aunts and uncles and many squeaky cousins were arriving by the secret paths in the space between the walls. It was a long time since anyone had had enough food for a family reunion, and there was rejoicing in the mouse nest for everyone but Ralph. He was thinking of the motorcycle he had lost and the promise he had broken. He had a dull, heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach and he did not feel like celebrating.

"Why, there's Ralph," squeaked his Aunt Sissy, who thought she was better than the rest of the family because she

lived in the bridal suite where, she led her relatives to believe, riches of rice fell to the carpet when the bride took off her hat and the groom shook out his coat. The rest of the family knew Aunt Sissy was not as grand as she pretended to be, because very few brides and grooms came to this hotel these days. "My, how you've grown."

Ralph never knew what to say when people told him how he had grown.

"Well, well! If it isn't Ralph!" said Uncle Lester, who had a nest inside the wall of the housekeeper's office, where the maids dropped doughnut crumbs every morning at ten o'clock when they had their coffee. "What's this I hear about you riding up and down the halls on a motorcycle?" Uncle Lester had a way of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.

"My land, a motorcycle," said old Aunt Dorothy. "Isn't that pretty dangerous?"

“Wouldn’t mind riding one myself if I were a few years younger,” said Uncle Lester.

All the little cousins came crowding around Ralph. “Show us your motorcycle,” they squeaked. “We want to ride it. Come on, give us a ride on your motorcycle, Ralph. Huh, Ralph? Come on, Ralph. Please!”

Ralph knew he was expected to be polite to all his relatives, even the squeaky little cousins. “Well . . .” Embarrassed and ashamed, he looked down at the floor. “I sort of . . . lost the motorcycle. In a pile of sheets and pillowcases.”

“Lost the motorcycle! Oh, Ralph,” cried his mother, genuinely alarmed.

Ralph knew what she was thinking. Did this mean the end of room service? Did she have to go back to pilfering crumbs for his brothers and sisters?

"That's a young mouse for you," said tactless Uncle Lester. "Can't take care of anything."

"If anybody asks me, I think it's a good thing he lost it," said Aunt Dorothy. "Riding a motorcycle is just plain foolhardy."

All the little cousins looked disappointed and sulky. "I don't think he ever had a motorcycle," said one.

"I bet he just made it up," said another, and the rest agreed.

Ralph felt terrible. The family reunion swirled on around him. The muffin and cookie were divided. Cousins fought over the blueberries. Uncles, usually overweight uncles, asked for second helpings. Everyone talked at once. The little cousins finished their dinner and went racing around the mouse nest. The aunts and uncles raised their voices to be heard above the racket their children made.

Suddenly there came from the knothole a noise that drowned out the squeaks and squeals of young mice at play.

“Sh-h-h!”

Not a mouse moved. They looked at one another, too terrified to speak.

“Pst! Hey, Ralph, come on out,” whispered Keith at the entrance to the mouse nest.

Ralph’s mother gave him a little shove, but no one spoke. With heavy feet Ralph walked to the knothole, but he did not go out into Room 215. “What do you want?” he asked.

“You and your family better be quiet in there or my mother will hear you. You know how she is about mice,” Keith said. “I don’t know why people say things are as quiet as mice. You sound like a pretty noisy bunch to me.”

Behind Ralph his relatives began to tiptoe

quietly away to their own homes, leaving his mother to do all the cleaning up. "Did you have a nice picnic?" Ralph asked, dreading what he must tell the boy.

"Yes. We saw an old mining town with a real jail with bars on the windows."

Keith reached into his pocket and pulled out something curved and hard and white with a rubber band fastened to it with a piece of Scotch tape. "I brought you a present," he said. "Come on out."

Puzzled and curious, Ralph squeezed through the knothole. "What is it?" he asked. Whatever the object was, he had never seen anything like it.

"Half a Ping-Pong ball I found down in the game room," said Keith. "See, I padded the inside with thistledown and anchored the rubber band to the top with Scotch tape."

"What for?" Ralph still did not understand.

"A crash helmet for you." Keith set the half Ping-Pong ball on Ralph's head and slipped the rubber band carefully around his whiskers until it rested under his chin. "There. That's just right. You need it big so there will be plenty of room for your ears. When you ride a motorcycle you need a crash helmet."

Ralph peered at Keith from under his new crash helmet, which rested lightly on his head. He knew he looked every inch a motorcycle racer, but never in his whole life had he felt so ashamed. He longed to crawl off into his hole and never face Keith again, but his conscience, which until now he did not know he had, would not let him. There was nothing to do but stand there in his fine new crash helmet and confess. "You might as well know," he told Keith. "I lost the motorcycle."

"Lost the motorcycle!" Keith, who had



been kneeling, sat back on his heels. "But how?"

"I rode it by mistake into a pillowcase in a heap of linen on the floor, and it got

dumped into the laundry hamper," confessed Ralph.

"You *rode* it into the pillowcase!" repeated Keith. "But you weren't supposed to ride it in the daytime. You *promised*."

"I know," agreed Ralph miserably. "I didn't exactly mean to ride it."

"Well, you see, the maid was vacuuming under the bed and I—" began Ralph, and stopped. "Oh, what's the use. I rode it and I lost it and it's probably gone to the laundry by now and I'm sorry."

The boy and the mouse were silent. Both were thinking about the little motorcycle with its clean lines and pair of shining chromium exhaust pipes.

"That motorcycle was my very most favorite of all my cars," said Keith. "I saved my allowance and bought it myself."

Ralph hung his head in his crash helmet. There was nothing more he could say. It

was a terrible thing he had done.

“I guess I should have known you weren’t old enough to be trusted with a motorcycle,” said Keith.

The boy could not have said anything that would hurt Ralph more.