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Mission Widow

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Amy put off going to bed for as long as she could. She walked around the sleeping children straightening quilts and making sure that her footsteps were distinct on the wood floor. She wrote loving words to Israel even though she had written today already and would soon be out of paper. She even emptied the chamber pot before it needed it so that she could stomp down the stairs and back up one more time. Finally, too tired to resist sleep any longer, she extinguished the lamp with one deep breath of courage and pulled her feet after her into bed.

The lamp was still warm beside her when she heard them. Like wind in sawdust their motion whispered through the house. The fat and cocky rats—their busy jaws already announcing the nightly feast and treasure hunt—were back.

Mortals do not perform miracles without practice. Amy had practiced. Her hand trembled as she lit the lamp but she slid her feet from the creaky bed without a sound and pushed them hard against the floor. Slowly she stood and took one step toward the doorway. Then, having no lightning bolt or magic spear, she seized the lamp with one hand and the broom with the other and sprang down the stairs. She swung at corners and threw at shadows, but the rats were still too quick for her. Impressed no doubt with WOMAN, but not empty-mouthed, they retreated to their nests.

Amy went back upstairs without counting her losses. She lay down and began pulling covers as if at last she could sleep, but it was a deception. How dare she seek comfort? Instead, she curled toward the edge of the bed, ready to spring.

This time she was quicker and when the battle was over one rat remained, stopped in flight by a broom. Lowering her lamp to the floor, Amy bent over the body. The night was not wasted. The stiff little legs looked incapable of mischief, but Laun's shoelace was in the teeth and

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the belly was bloated. As Amy worked the shoelace free, she studied the startled eyes. She ought to leave the body where it lay as a warning to returning comrades. But she knew that rats do not have brains. If they did, they would take two shoelaces, and they would not eat her winter stores until their bellies swelled up like balloons. The rat lying dead in the middle of her kitchen floor was simply a dumb animal with an instinct for her property. She picked it up by the tip of its tail and, walking outside in her bare feet, flung it as far as she could toward the desert. Then, even though she knew that one enemy casualty does not win a war, she went upstairs to stay. She closed her door and hugged the pillow around her ears. After all, she reasoned, what does a mission widow have of her own if not a night's sleep?

She dreamed of Israel. He was not in Australia on a mission. He was downstairs fixing the kitchen door. In his Prince Albert suit and black hat he was fitting soft sanded wood to wood and measuring with an eye toward perfection, his soundless motion detached from Amy's watching. She tiptoed around him and now the door was glass and she looked at him through it. He held it tenderly; his hands moved it into place and secured it without screw or hammer.

Amy needed to ask him a question but the door needed him too. Australia needed him. He was distant through the door and no matter what Amy did or where she stood she could not get his attention. Finally, her tapping and moving broke the glass and he was gone.

Amy opened her eyes. Israel was not beside her, or downstairs either. He was across the ocean in a green exotic land. The rats were dragging off her belongings and eating her food, and the kitchen door would not shut right for at least two more years because Lola had been swinging on it again, a small hand clinging to each knob, a bare foot lifted to press hard against each side so that the floor would not get in her way. Israel had fixed the door again before he left but Lola would not be cured of swinging, as if she understood that soon, tomorrow maybe, her bottom would smack the floor.

Could there have been a mistake? Why had Uncle Dan, childless, been sent to Chicago? Mamie's letters came and went in two weeks! Even Tennessee (where folks said a missionary had been tarred and feathered) was close enough for a wife to ask a question and get an answer before her hair turned gray.

The leaves and blossoms Israel sent were brittle by the time they arrived but the words, six weeks aged, were tender. She felt each letter

before she opened it, moving her fingertips around the fragile enclosures he always sent to shorten the miles between them. She and the children held each piece before they slipped it under glass.

Yet weary bones and sleepless nights told Amy that a whole bushel of keepsakes would not replace a missing sack of corn saved for human consumption in winter. She must save the corn, and the sacks of fruit, and the shoelaces. Even the rags, worn thin, were necessary. With or without a man's help, she must get rid of the rats.

When Amy slept again, Israel was still wearing the new black suit. This time he was lying on his stomach in the dirt by the back door looking under the step that had tripped Amy and a load of wash. His eyes glowing with purpose, he studied each board. It was the face of the watchmaker in Salt Lake City. Bent over a small round intricacy as God himself might bend over his world, he mended. But the watchmaker was wearing an apron, not a Prince Albert suit! Which did God wear? Or did he change clothes to suit the task before him?

The step looked perfect to Amy now, but Israel kept fixing. She ran to bring his overalls from where they always hung inside the back door. The washtub was there, but where were the overalls? She could not find them anywhere and slept out the night with a frown on her face.

Morning and children woke Amy together. As she opened her eyes, necessity put sudden lumps in the feather mattress and there was nothing to do but get up. She followed the children down the stairs and while she made a fire and put mush on to cook, Lola and Irma ran to see what the rats had taken. Laun studied the broom enviously. It might be good for fighting one more war but the broken straws had swept the floor for the last time. Why, he wanted to know, was he old enough to help make a broom but too young to stay up and see it work.

"Brooms don't work," said Amy. "We need something faster and more efficient." She paused. Even saying the words was hard. "We need a trap."

The worry on Laun's face, she knew, mirrored her own.

"Can't we use poison? Grandpa would give us some."

"Strychnine is out of the question," said Amy. No matter what Grandpa said about well-taught offspring, Amy would not set where a child might discover it the tempting saucer of white powder. As for heaping her valuables around her bed the way some did and sleeping with a frying pan in her hand, she would never do that either. She

had envisioned a rat's nest, walls banked with her dried apples and peaches and corn, cracks stuffed with her dishrags, and ceilings decorated with her shoelaces and ribbons. No, she would not sleep in a nest.

Somewhere on the ranch hung the steel traps Israel had used along his trapline. When Laun could not find them, Amy was relieved. She had seen their black bite and wept over their victims. Even fox furs, warm and lovely, did not erase those scenes. No, she would use a deadfall instead. It would be messy if not weighted properly, but it would work. And she could build it herself. She sent Laun to the old mill site for a board comfortably longer and wider than a rat. With Israel's jacknife, he cut willows along the creek bed while Amy chose a gleaming cob of corn for bait and hefted the flatirons. Two would do.

Amy and the children built the trap by the hearth. It was a strange-looking instrument, but as deadfalls go, it went. Lola and Irma teased the tempting bait with willows too spineless for prop or trigger. Down came the board and irons. Laun reset the contraption and the girls teased it and it fell again. It was built just right. After supper, the children hurried to their beds without fussing, and Amy, sensing adventure, climbed the stairs with light feet.

The first night Amy emptied the trap six times. She let Laun help at first—a pretended man's presence nearby—but he fell asleep between rats and Amy was left alone. As she disposed of the dead, she considered the food and belongings her enemy had taken. Otherwise, she could not have emptied the deadfall by herself. She was not a delicate woman. She had lifted her share of mice out of the flour bin and swatted enough flies to paper heaven, but the seasonal slaughter of a pig or calf was man's domain. She stayed inside the house. Even killing the tired old rooster that deserved better, when his turn finally came to be eaten, Israel spared her and brought him plucked to the kitchen door. How could a wife who had been thus protected dispose of smashed rats the size of cottontails? Israel? I have a question!

Night after night, all night, Amy emptied and reset the deadfall, sometimes hardly reaching the top of the stairs before the flatirons came crashing down again. Standing there in her nightgown she was sure that the rats, brainless still, spent their days in line waiting for darkness and a chance to nibble the diminishing cob of corn and die. Their insolence made climbing the stairs between victims to lean longingly

toward her made bed seem more and more foolish as the nights passed by.

And then, abruptly, there were fewer trips downstairs until finally one night the traps did not fall. Amy lay in amazed silence, flinching at sounds. She could not believe that she had won. In the morning everything was in its place, and the deadfall waited. That night she fell asleep. In her dreams she and Israel were no longer separated by doors and questions and he was wearing his overalls. The next day she wrote to him about her victory, and at bedtime she made sure the trap was assembled, but, clearly, all of the rats were either dead or over to Grandpa's eating strychnine.

The night the trap resumed falling, Amy knew instantly that the enemy lying dead in her kitchen was not a rat. The fragrance of fresh skunk exploded through the house. She lay still, pretending to dream, pushing herself into the mattress. When the children began calling for her, she hurried to shut their door and insist that they stay behind it. Then, holding the lamp with one hand and her nose with the other, she tiptoed slowly down the stairs. She lowered the lamp toward the board and flatirons. They moved. The skunk spread out beneath them was alarmed, disheveled, somewhat compressed, but alive. Alive? Israel? She could not breathe. She could hardly see. What would a man do with a skunk, half alive, in the kitchen? Would it take *three* flatirons to kill a skunk?

The stench gave Amy no time to deliberate. Gasping, she took one tiny paw between her fingertips and dragged the skunk up the stairs and across the bedroom floor and threw it out the window. Such a course seemed merciful, but as she looked into the darkness below, she realized that she could not be sure. She ran down the stairs and outside. There the skunk lay, more alarmed, more disheveled, suffering, but alive! What could she use? Not a broom, surely! Oh dear, no. The skunk must die by itself. But how? And how soon? She had heard that drowning was a sure way to be rid of a skunk, stench and all. How much water would that take?

She got the washtub and set it beside the skunk. Then she ran to the well for water until the tub was full to the rim. She knew she was being extravagant, but how was a woman to judge? And what if when it came time to pick up the poor thing and drop it into the precious water, she couldn't do it? What if afterward the skunk knew she wasn't Israel and wouldn't stay in the tub long enough to drown?

Mocked by the skunk's misery, and her own, Amy took a deep breath of the putrid air, and with both hands against the side of the big tub of water, tipped it over on top of the skunk. While water soaked into the parched ground, Amy went inside for quilts and made beds on the opposite side of the house. Surely the water would have had to be thrown out anyway. If a skunk had died in it, probably it would have been no good for any other use.

The skunk passed away in the privacy of the family washtub. Amy and the children, a house away, rolled under the distant stars and watched for morning.

Dear Israel,

The rats are still gone. The food and dishclothes are safe, but I have ruined the washtub. I have made lye soap in it and have scrubbed it (and the stairs and floors, too, of course) and have let the sun beat into it all day, but it still smells to high heaven. Perhaps you have written already to tell me what I should have done. It was frightful. And why did I take the skunk upstairs? Every step is a reminder of my short-sightedness. On scrub day the smell is as fresh as the night it happened. As for washday, the tub holds water still of course, but the wet brings out the skunk and on Saturday, although the children smell clean, they simply cannot bathe in it.

I'm afraid you won't even want to come home to us. Oh, of course you will love us the same, and perhaps the house will be livable with time, but the washtub, so useful, so necessary, is ruined forever. Your affectionate, foolish wife,

Amy