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Inside These Walls

One Sunday morning, Bernard heard a noise in his bedroom wall. He picked up a shoe from beside his bed and threw it at a spot above the dresser.

“What’s going on?” asked Mathilda, in her disturbed-from-sleep voice.

Bernard jumped with surprise at hearing his wife right there next to him in bed. He could not remember the last time they had woken up together. He rolled over to give her a good-morning kiss, but she was already out of bed and pacing around.

Suddenly Mathilda stopped in her tracks. She heard the noise, too. “What *is* that?”

Bernard pulled the covers over his head so he could think better. This wasn’t your usual Sunday morning noise, your run-of-the-mill house-settling sound. After a few moments’ meditation, though, he had it. He peeked his head out from under the covers and declared: “Scurrying! It’s the sound of scurrying. There must be something living inside our walls.”

The noise now seemed to come from all the walls at once, surrounding them, pressing in and making the already-small room seem stifling.

Mathilda rubbed her chin. “I think you’re right, I think it is scurrying.” She nodded her head and looked at the wall. “I bet it’s a family of squirrels. It sounds like squirrels, doesn’t it?”

They heard the noise again. “That’s the mommy squirrel,” Mathilda said. “She’s peeling some nuts to feed to her babies. And that’s the daddy squirrel, come home to add to the nest.”

“It sounds like they’re trapped in there to me,” Bernard said.

“No, they’re not. They got in there in the first place, and they can get out if they want. They’ve made a home in our walls.” Mathilda walked over to the wall and put her hands on it. “They’re living in there because it’s so cold outside. Isn’t that nice? We should turn up the heat so the baby squirrels won’t freeze.”

Bernard frowned. “I bet it’s rats.”

When they’d first moved into this house, Mathilda’s mother had given her a brand new shotgun. “It’s a rat killer,” she’d said. Mathilda had been afraid of rats, ever since she was a little girl and a rat had crawled in bed with her. “Rats are going to be your biggest problem, living in an old house like that,” her mother had said. “You see a rat, this thing’ll take care of it.” Mathilda thought it was probably the most expensive present she’d ever received. She kept it loaded in a box underneath

their bed.

“Rats?” Mathilda said. Her eyes grew wide. She unpacked the shotgun and fired in the general direction of the wall. The shiny barrels smoked. The blast echoed, and plaster dust hung in the air.

“Now you’ve done it,” Bernard said. “Putting holes in the walls like that, you’re going to let the rats in here with us.”

Bernard didn’t really mind her impetuousness, though. It was one of the reasons he’d married her. He looked at the hole she made. The blast had torn through the inside wall like paper, shredding an area about a foot in diameter. You could see all the way through to the outside. Mathilda stared at the hole, too, eyes wide, shifting back and forth, taking in what she’d done.

“Oh, God, this is terrible,” she said.

“Not really,” Bernard said. “Our deposit’s only a hundred bucks.”

“No, that’s not it. I just remembered, Mom’s coming over today!”

“Oh. We’ll cover up the hole with a poster,” Bernard said. They heard the noise again. “Sounds like you missed.”

“Get out of bed.” Mathilda resumed her pacing, looking for something to cover up the hole. “Hurry. We’ve got a lot to do. Mom will be here in a couple hours.”

“What am I going to tell her this time?” Bernard was propped on his elbow in bed, watching his wife, who was now gathering dirty socks off the floor.

“I don’t know,” Mathilda said.

“You know she’s going to want something big this month, or she’ll start in again, reminding me of all your father had done by the time he was my age. She’ll make me sign up to teach Sunday School. She’ll give me one of her talks.”

“I know.”

“Let’s tell her I’ve taken up gourmet cooking,” Bernard said.

“Then you’d have to cook her something. Do you want to be in charge of that?”

The noise reached their ears with renewed fury. Mathilda put her gun back in its box and gave Bernard a worried look. Bernard stared at the wall and thought. Then he said: “The way to handle these rats is to work from the outside.”

Bernard got out of bed, put on his shoes, and went out to the shed to get a crowbar and a flashlight. He came around to the outside of the wall. Mathilda saw his hand feeling around the hole. She liked the way Bernard could take charge in a

crisis. She first met him when they got stuck together in an elevator. Bernard had been the one to keep everybody calm until help arrived. But it had been a long time since they'd had a crisis around here.

"Bernard," Mathilda called through the hole in the wall. "I've got an idea. When Mom comes over, let's tell her we're planning a family. Let's say you talked to our accountant, and he said we are economically solid enough to start a family."

Bernard peered back at her, through the hole. "Do you think she'd believe I have an accountant?"

"That's what we told her last month, remember? She was so proud you were taking an interest in our finances," Mathilda reminded him.

"Oh, right." Bernard poked around the inside of the hole with his crowbar. "It's not quite big enough for me to get my head in there to look around," he shouted.

"I'll have to make the hole bigger." He pried off a couple boards from the outside of the house. "We'll tell your Mom it was termites."

"How many kids are we going to have?"

"What?" Bernard placed his ear to the hole.

"I said, 'How many kids should we tell Mom we're going to have?'"

"Just one should do for now, shouldn't it?"

"Yes," Mathilda answered. "But we're supposed to be *planning* our family. We have to decide all this in advance."

"How about two of each kind," Bernard answered. He stuck the flashlight inside the hole and looked around the inside of their walls. It was mostly hollow in there; just some two by fours and plaster. From this new vantage point, the house looked fragile, like you could push it over without much effort. Before this, he'd always thought it was a solid house.

"I can't see anything from here," Bernard said. "I'm going to have to go inside." He pried off more boards, making room to step inside the wall. Mathilda felt he had it under control. She went into the bathroom to have a shower.

Bernard was a small guy, and soon had a hole big enough to fit through. He found that if he sucked in his breath, he could scoot sideways fairly easily through the wall. But he was a little hesitant. It was not a space Bernard had previously taken into account. He'd thought of the walls as solid, as if there were nothing but wood between his bedroom and the outside. But this was a space that could hold things: insects and spider webs, beers cans and cigarette butts from the construction workers, sawdust, rocks, dirt. This opened a whole new world for Bernard, as long as he sucked in his breath and scooted sideways. He heard the noise off to his

left and scooted that way.

Mathilda stepped out of the shower, dried off, and began brushing her hair in the bathroom mirror. She heard something in the wall that sounded like a giant rat. “Bernard,” she called. But he didn’t answer. “Bernard!”

When she turned sixteen, Mathilda’s mother had given her an old revolver her father had carried in the war. “For boys,” she’d said. “They’ll be your biggest problem now. Keep the gun in your purse. A boy bothers you, this thing’ll take care of him.”

Mathilda wasn’t afraid of boys anymore, but she kept that revolver around for sentimental reasons. It hung in the shower, from an old Soap-on-a-Rope. The rumbling sound in the wall grew louder. “Bernard!”

Bernard was getting better at wall scooting. He’d followed the noise around a couple of corners, until he figured he must be somewhere in the back of the house. There was an old nail hole that he could peek through. It looked into the bathroom. Mathilda was there, in front of the mirror, brushing her hair. She was naked, the water from the shower still glistening on her skin. He scraped at the hole with his fingernail to make it a little bigger.

In eighth-grade P.E., some boys from Bernard’s class had removed a ceiling panel in the dressing room and crawled up into the attic of the gym. They had claimed there was a hole in the ceiling where you could look down and see the girls changing. Bernard had never gone up there himself, but he used to imagine he did. He used to pick out a girl during P.E., memorize every bit of her. Then later he’d think about that hole, and what that girl would look like as she changed.

Bernard heard Mathilda calling him, but didn’t answer. It drove him wild, watching her like this. He didn’t want her to know he was there. She turned from the mirror and faced the wall, faced him. His eyes could hardly take her all in. He’d never seen her so naked, not like this. Mathilda walked over to the shower and leaned in to get something. Her smooth skin stretched taut across her back and bottom. There was a little mole at the bottom of her butt he’d never noticed before, a dot interrupting the supple, smooth curve of flesh around it, a nipple. It was the most alluring thing he’d ever seen. A gun blast interrupted his thoughts, and he felt like he’d been stuck by a large pin, but he couldn’t tell where. He screamed.

“Oh, God. Oh God! I’ve killed somebody.” Mathilda let go of the gun. It

swung freely on its rope, barrel still smoking, clinking against the shower tiles.
“Bernard? Oh God, was that you?”

Bernard felt a dull throbbing in his right shin. He wasn't sure yet if it hurt, but he moaned anyway. Then he said, “It's me.”

“Oh, God, I'm so sorry,” she said. “I thought you were a giant rat.” Mathilda opened up the medicine cabinet and looked inside. “Are you killed? Are you okay?”

“It's my shin,” Bernard said. “I think it's just grazed. I'm fine.”

Out of the medicine cabinet, Mathilda took rubbing alcohol, a cotton ball, band aids, and a bottle of aspirin. She walked over to the wall where Bernard's voice came from, and began pacing back and forth, as if waiting for a hole to open up.

“Bernard, I can't get to you,” she said.

“Yes, I know that.”

“You've got to come out of there.”

Bernard thought. Then he said: “I'll make a little hole, and you pass the stuff in to me.” He punched the plaster with his crowbar. It cracked a little. In another couple punches, he had opened a little hole. Mathilda passed him the band aids first. He realized, however, that he wasn't going to be able to reach his own leg.

“I've got a better idea,” Bernard said. He gave the hole a couple more cracks with his crowbar until it opened up wide enough for him to stick his injured leg through. “Now *you* can fix my leg.”

Mathilda looked at the leg protruding from the wall, between the tub and the toilet-paper dispenser. It wasn't hurt so bad, just bleeding a little. Usually she couldn't stand the sight of blood. She often vomited when she saw pictures of accident victims on TV. But this was different, with the leg just sitting there, all by itself. It was more scientific, a model of a leg. She cut away the pants with her fingernail scissors. She poured alcohol over the wound and crumbled a few aspirins on it, for good measure. She covered it with six band aids. It might need a splint, too, so she tied the wooden handle from the toilet plunger to the leg.

Once all the blood was cleaned up, it was a nice-looking leg. It was muscular, well formed, she noticed. Mathilda considered herself an expert on the male leg, having spent many mornings watching joggers out the front window. She liked to observe the muscles working in those legs, as the men ran by. Those legs were like machines, and she couldn't help imagining what else they'd be good for. She had encouraged Bernard to take up jogging, but he was afraid to wear shorts, even to bed. She'd always thought of Bernard's legs as just something he used when he

walked. But this leg she held in her hands, this was a *leg*. It wasn't even like part of Bernard. It was as if the leg had sprung spontaneously out of the bathroom wall for her enjoyment. She stroked his calf muscle, sinewy and hard like a statue, powerful like a machine.

"Bernard," Mathilda called through the wall. "What if this month, what we told Mom was true? What if we really were planning to have a baby?"

"*What?*" asked the muffled voice inside the wall. Bernard wasn't sure how to take this. He'd never heard Mathilda talk about the future before. Mathilda kept her eye on the leg.

"I wouldn't feel right telling her the truth," Bernard said. "I'd have to make up something else. I'm adding on a deck. No, I'm taking a night class." He looked out the nail hole. Mathilda was cleaning his leg. He was amazed at the job she had done with his wound. She'd never seemed to be the nursing type before.

Mathilda cooed: "You'll be a daddy." It seemed to Bernard that Mathilda was talking to the leg itself, that she had not even heard him. She rubbed the leg, caressed it, stroking up and down with a cotton ball soaked in alcohol. This reminded Bernard vaguely of a dream he used to have about his old high school nurse.

Bernard shifted to get a better view. Mathilda hadn't yet discovered the nail hole. She still thought he couldn't see her. He stuck his finger through the hole to make it bigger. She was kissing his leg with her eyes closed: big, juicy kisses, tongue out, full of abandon, secure in her sense of privacy. Her kisses worked slowly upward to where his thigh protruded from the wall. She was on all fours, purring, licking.

"You think you could make another hole in that wall?" she said.

Bernard grabbed the crowbar and started cracking.

"Oh my God, it's the giant rat!" Mathilda jumped back like a frightened cat. Bernard heard the noise, too, very loud and off to his left. Mathilda looked up and noticed Bernard's peephole. She grabbed a towel and covered herself.

"Do something, Bernard!"

Bernard drew his leg back in the wall and scooted toward the noise, until he felt his foot bump against something furry. He picked it up. It was their dog Mortimer.

"Is it the giant rat?" Mathilda called desperately.

"It's Mortimer." Bernard lifted up the dog. Mortimer licked him in the face. The dog stuck his nose through the new hole Bernard had started, wiggling his head through into the bathroom.

“Mortimer!” Mathilda cried. Mortimer wiggled and squirmed until he’d squeezed entirely through the hole. Mathilda gathered him in her arms.

“Oh, Mortimer,” she cooed. “It was you in there all along. You had me scared. How’d you get in there?”

Bernard squatted and tried to squeeze through the hole, too. He got his head partway through, but that was as far as he could make it. “He must’ve crawled in after me,” he said.

“No, no. He’s been in there for days,” Mathilda said. “Look at him.”

“I just saw him this morning when I went out to the shed. It’s something else we’ve been hearing in the walls.”

“Oh, poor Mortimer,” Mathilda said, unconvinced. “Poor baby. You’ve been trapped in there all this time.”

“It’s not so bad,” Bernard said. “It’s not like being trapped at all.”

Mortimer jumped back into the wall. He returned to the bathroom moments later, carrying three tiny, pink, fuzzy creatures by the scruff of the neck.

“Ohhh. Puppies!” Mathilda cried. “Mortimer went in there to have puppies!”

Bernard poked his head back through the hole to get a better look. “Those aren’t puppies,” he said. “They’re rats.”

“How do you know?”

“Because Mortimer’s a boy dog. He can’t have puppies.” But he knew Mathilda wouldn’t listen when she got like this.

Mathilda was playing with those rat-puppies, giving each one a name. “I’ll tell Mom all about you guys. We’ll start raising puppies.” She cradled all three in her arms, holding them against the terry cloth of the towel she wore. “And I’ll tell her that you’re the cutest one, little Mortimer, Jr.”

Bernard struggled to stand up inside the wall. “I thought we were telling Mom about our *own* babies.” His voice was muffled. He saw that she was no longer interested, absorbed as she was with those rat-puppies. He shook his injured leg. It was stiff, but didn’t cause him any pain. She had done a good job with it.

Bernard had no problem maneuvering through the walls back to the bedroom. In fact, he found it a little easier and even more comfortable to scoot along with his stiff leg than it had been before. He could push the leg sideways, to his right, sliding easily, then pull the rest of his body to catch up with it. Inside these walls, Bernard moved about freely. There were no doors to open, no pieces of furniture to walk around, none of the complications of a three-dimensional space. His eyes had even begun to adjust so he could see without a flashlight. The pale, rough, pine boards and abandoned spider webs seemed to fall back and make room for him as he scooted past. He was at home here.

In no time he reached the hole in the bedroom wall. He tried to crawl out the way he came in, but his leg had stiffened so much that it was impossible to move any way except side to side.

“Mathilda!” he called. He couldn’t remember where he’d left the crowbar. When Mathilda came in the bedroom, he’d just have to ask her to get a hammer and break him out.

Mathilda soon appeared in the room. Through the shotgun-shredded wall, Bernard watched her walk to the closet and let her towel drop. Her body looked graceful as she sorted through her clothes, trying to decide what to wear. She cradled the rat-puppy Mortimer, Jr. in her left arm and spoke softly to it. Mortimer, Jr. licked her breast as if he wanted to nurse, and she held him closer. Bernard felt a naturalness exude from her—motherhood, posture, beauty. All reserved for the eyes of the walls. He started to call out to her, then changed his mind.

Someone knocked on the front door. Mathilda continued sorting through the closet, finally selecting a tight black dress. It was the one Bernard loved but she never wore because it was so short. As she slipped it on, Mortimer, Jr. whined and buried his head deeper into her chest. “Bernard?” She heard something behind her. The room appeared empty, yet somehow watched over, as if the walls themselves stood guard. The knocking grew louder, more insistent. She made no move to answer, though: it was a sound she could no longer hear. Mathilda’s eyes searched the room once more and caught the flash of a bare leg disappearing into the wall. It made only a slight sound, a whispering scurry that came from within the walls, calling to her from the secret depths.