

Gulliver Swift awoke once again tied down, face up, to his back lawn. It was the third time this month, the month being April, so at least the weather was milder. He was loosely bound with cooking twine threaded around golf tees staked into the ground all around him. Gulliver did not play golf, nor did he ever cook anything more complicated than scrambled eggs or grilled cheese, neither of which required trussing. Where they'd found the items to bind him was a mystery.

In contrast to the budding boughs of the cottonwood tree looming above, the parched lawn beneath him was brown and crunchy, more straw-like than grass, yet it'd somehow dampened his roller-skating elephant pajamas. Though Gulliver supposed it may have been from his own sweat. He sweated a lot.

Rankled, he sat up without much struggle at all, yanking the tees from the earth. He unraveled the string from him, bunched it up into a ball.

He wondered what time it was. He didn't want to be late again. As long as Gulliver performed quality work and met job deadlines, his boss was generally laidback about his occasional tardiness and even lapses in good hygiene, but he didn't want to test the limits of his employer's lenient nature.

"Mornin', Gulliver."

Gulliver turned his head. His neighbor Mr. Jensen was watering his newly planted flowerbed beyond the short chain-link fence separating their yards. He was a stocky old man with wisps of silver hair combed over his balding pate, and floppy, doorknocker jowls. Fond of wearing plaid shirts under bib-and-brace overalls, it gave him an authentic enough bucolic look without having to cultivate anything more ambitious than chrysanthemums and marigolds.

"Good morning, Mr. Jensen."

Normally, Gulliver would've been embarrassed to be seen in his roller-skating elephant pajamas, or the parachuting monkey or toy-making elf ones, but by now Mr. Jensen had beheld his entire bedtime wardrobe under basically identical circumstances. He was polite enough not to ever poke fun at it either.

"Little people lash you down again, eh?" Mr. Jensen asked, less out of a genuine interest than as a conversation-starter.

Gulliver nodded. After the sixth or seventh time Mr. Jensen had witnessed this sort of thing happen to him, Gulliver had felt obliged to explain, candidly, if only because it seemed the neighborly thing to do. And Mr. Jensen had been very understanding, nary batting an incredulous eye.

"Ever wonder why you don't wake up?"

“I’m a heavy sleeper.” This was true. Gulliver once slept through a category F3 tornado that about near destroyed Mrs. Vogler’s house down the street. Some people had likened it to a scared-shitless herd of cattle stampeding through their yards, quaking their houses, but Gulliver might as well have been lazing on some tranquil beach thousands of miles away. He didn’t even know Fanny Kessler’s uprooted laundry rack had impaled the wall due north of his slumbering head until he’d risen the following morning and banged his brow against it.

“Not so heavy a troop of tiny folk can’t carry you, eh?” Mr. Jensen quipped, chuckling like he’d swallowed some industrial-strength glue.

Gulliver forced a smile, not wanting his neighbor to think he was nettled by him. He rose to his feet and brushed himself off.

“Gonna be a fine spring,” commented Mr. Jensen, assessing the clear cerulean sky while spraying his crocuses. “I can tell.”

Gulliver nodded amiably, wished his neighbor a good day, then headed into his house, blades of dead grass tickling the soles of his bare feet.

Initially, Gulliver had thought the house infested with mice. He would often hear the muffled patter from armies of tiny paws, as if hundreds of Tic Tacs were spilling down the inner drywall. Sometimes he’d discover the groceries in his cupboards raided, the linens in his closet pillaged. Gulliver surmised the missing pillowcases and hand towels were being claimed for nesting material, his filched cookies and beans likely cached in some dark, dank recess long unseen by human eyes. Dumb as these lower-lifes may be, they still had encroached upon his domain, helping themselves to his creature comforts. Such impertinence he could not abide.

Gulliver bought a bushel of rodent traps from Hap’s Hardware, setting them along the baseboards behind the furniture and in every other nook and cranny throughout his house. For bait, he first used cheese—a double Gloucester—then bread, peanut butter, chocolate, even dog kibble. To Gulliver’s astonishment, over the course of a week, none of the beady-eyed buggers had yet tripped the deadly spring-loaded hammers, never so much as nibbled at any of the appetizing morsels. He figured they were either very clever, or very finicky. Either way, he would not underestimate them again.

Gulliver collected the traps and painted them all charcoal black. He then cooked up a flank steak, seasoned with Mrs. Pinch, and diced it into mouse-bite sized pieces. He baited the camouflaged traps and reset them in the deepest niches he could reach.

This next round had yielded a near miss.

Gulliver heard the whip-crack of the trap shortly after midnight, about the same time he'd been dozing off. It took him near half an hour to pinpoint which one was sprung. To his chagrin, no mouse had met its neck-broken, spine-snapped demise.

What he did find, though, was puzzling. Disturbingly so.

Caught under the hammer was a shirt, a tiny white shirt, not much bigger than his thumbprint. Gulliver wrenched it from the trap, bringing it up before his eyes to examine closer. The miniature garment appeared to have been stitched together from two cutout swatches of cloth, most likely from one of his pilfered pillowcases. The fabric was speckled with red pinhead-sized splotches. Blood.

After downing two juice glasses of what was left of his father's best brandy, Gulliver drifted off to sleep on the beige Ultrasuede sofa, the pullover fit for a finger puppet clamped in his palm. He dreamt of a moribund Mouse King beneath his floor, sprawled on its hacky-sack deathbed, its ribs shattered, its guts ruptured. Its whiskers twitched terribly as it delivered a final edict to its gathered subjects: they would rain merciless vengeance upon the one who had engineered their revered emperor's assassination.

He didn't stir until early afternoon, when the sunlight lanced through the bay windows and slapped him across the face. Listlessly he rose from the sofa and shuffled toward the dining table, frowning at the empty brandy bottle on it. He fetched an unopened bottle of fourteen-year-old scotch—which by now had to be almost triple that age—from the cherrywood-veneered liquor cabinet.

Gulliver unscrewed the cap off the scotch and poured himself a shot into the same unrinsed juice glass from the night before. Knocking it back in one foul-tasting swig, he only then noticed the bloodied doll's shirt was no longer cupped in his hand.

He scanned the path he'd taken from the sofa to the dining table and recognized, jutting from beneath the faux-Tiffany mission floor lamp, the patch of white. He stepped toward it, bending down to pick it up. Dust bunnies (or were they fur balls?) clung to it. He shook them off.

That was when Gulliver spotted the Scrabble game set up on the glass-top coffee table. It was the deluxe edition, with the rotating board and raised surface grid. A few letter tiles were already laid out on it, not placed there arbitrarily, but not part of an ongoing game either.

It was a message.

The message on the Scrabble board read:

NO KILL US

Gulliver deduced these were not your average unwelcome vermin he was dealing with, but rather a far more sentient, perhaps even civilized, critter. It also occurred to him it might be somebody's outlandish prank. This theory he soon dismissed, since he had neither friends nor enemies who cared enough about him to orchestrate such an elaborate hoax.

Gulliver searched his home, peering over, around and under his furniture, rummaging through every cabinet, closet and cubbyhole, even sifting through boxes of cereal and detergent. He saw nothing out of the ordinary. Yet somebody had brought out the Scrabble box from the hall closet and arranged it on the coffee table. And that somebody, whoever they were, wanted to let him know they didn't much appreciate his recent efforts to exterminate them.

He again heard the rat-a-tat-tat of tiny scuttling feet near where he stood. Again, he could see nothing amiss. Growing riled, and a mite alarmed, he decided to take a more direct approach.

"Who are you?" he inquired apprehensively. Then, more peremptory, "Who are you, I said! Answer me!"

There was no answer. Gulliver felt a bit foolish anticipating one.

Then came a faint, high-pitched squeak, much like when rubbing a balloon. Coming from somewhere within the house, Gulliver was certain.

He darted from room to room, flashlight in hand, methodically inspecting every possible hiding spot, no matter how small or inaccessible. More than an hour later, he uncovered nothing but a red checker piece, some coins, and a copper button he had lost from a jacket he no longer owned. Frustrated, he returned to the living room where he'd first heard the peculiar, untraceable noise.

The Scrabble board imparted a new message:

WE NO WANT HURT YOU

Gulliver's anger escalated, bristling the vellus hairs on the scruff of his neck. How dare someone invade his home and threaten him! If there were any hurting to be done, he would damn well be the one doling it out.

"Show yourselves!" he roared. "Or so help me I will smoke you out, choke you out, do whatever I have to do to take you out!"

Moments later, they came out.