

THE REAL WOLF MAN



PHILLIP WOLF

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*For Mom,
staying current with constantly changing technology.
You're doing great!*

“I didn't have time to write a short letter,
so I wrote a long one instead.”

—Mark Twain

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INTRODUCTION



When I attended junior high school in Allen, Texas, everyone on the athletics team liked my last name. Some called me Wolf, but most nicknamed me Wolf Man. To this day, Wolf Man has stuck with me.

Despite being one of the shorter kids in school, I excelled at high jump. I sprinted in the 220-yard dash and 100 hurdles (short and high). I was the quickest at sit-ups in grade school, completing more than sixty per minute. After everyone's fitness test one day, the coach asked me to do them again in front of the entire class. I was shocked when I completed about sixty-five or seventy sit-ups after doing them only minutes prior.

I also had a knack for climbing up and down a fifteen-foot knotted rope hanging from the beams in the gymnasium faster than anyone else.

Those were the days when times were simpler.

Even today, I remember when I was born. No one believes me whenever I bring this up in random conversations. There was nothing, and then there was something. It was the weirdest feeling. That's all I can describe.

I recall most of my childhood. But, since age twenty-five, I can't remember shit from a week ago.

The one thing I kept up throughout my life was reading and writing—mostly writing. Writing takes me back to simpler times. I enjoy including my childhood experiences in the stories I write. I'm only a kid once, so why not be a kid forever? Writing keeps me in that bubble where I can relive the 1980s as much as I like. If I could revisit the '80s for real, I'd return in a heartbeat.

I read an introduction to a book by Stephen King where he mentions that “an author has endless opportunities to revise and improve his work. His stories are never perfect until his final breath or when

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he can no longer tell stories. Only then can his stories be considered complete and final.” This rings true as I reflect on most of the stories I’ve written for this collection. I can continue tweaking them, adding new characters, improving descriptions, rewriting endings, etc. But I will most likely not revisit these stories when this publication is out. I will continue to revisit them in my head, however.

The stories included in this collection have never been previously published. They consist mostly of horror and are not intended for young readers. So, before little Johnny comes running up to you in a bookstore with this book or asks you to order it online, don’t let the innocent cover fool you. Each element on the front and back cover represents a macabre tale.

“Prey for Escape” was the closest I got to being accepted for publication in an issue of *Worlds of Fantasy and Horror* (formerly *Weird Tales*). I received a personal response from the editor, which was rare and exciting compared to the usual form letters that came with my rejection notices. In those days, I kept a log of all my submissions to various magazine editors and rarely received personalized rejection responses. Editors didn’t have time to respond to every submission, especially before email was widely available. I would write new stories while waiting for responses (ten to twelve weeks or longer). Of all the rejection notices I received for my story submissions, only two editors provided me with personal and encouraging feedback on how I could improve my writing: Darrell Schweitzer from *Weird Tales* (in the 1990s) and Marion Zimmer Bradley, founder and editor of *Marion Zimmer Bradley’s Fantasy Magazine*. These responses were like small victories in my eyes and motivated me to keep writing.

My strategy for becoming a full-time writer was to publish some short stories in magazines before writing my first book and mailing the manuscript with a query letter to literary agencies.

Growing up, I spent years buying new editions of *Writer’s Digest* books and magazines, attending author seminars, reading, researching, and submitting stories to editors. Alas, I found myself going in circles.

In 1992, I enrolled in a creative writing class as an elective during my junior year of high school. I wrote some short stories for the class and continued submitting manuscripts to editors. In 1994, I took another creative writing course during my first year of college. I remember vividly halfway through the class when the professor announced his first science fiction novel was being published. He had been trying to

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publish it for ten years. He was so excited that day when he shared his good news.

I was jealous.

I never kept a folder or binder containing the stories I wrote during college the way I did in high school. But over the years, I dusted off my old high school creative writing binder and skimmed through it to reminisce about those pivotal years when I wanted to be a writer.

I'm fifty as I write this, and I've cracked open that one-inch binder again to decide which stories and assignments I wanted to revise for this book. As I sifted through the pages like an editor and their discard pile, I came across an assignment I wrote about myself. It is both nostalgic and bittersweet to revisit my younger self and see how much has changed.

I was filled with conflicting emotions when I began this collection of twisted tales. On one hand, I'm excited to rewrite my stories and see them in a new light. But I'm afraid of what these tales may reveal about my weird, creative mind. Will I be able to honor my past while accepting where I am now? It's a daunting task, but one that I must face head-on.

Many of these stories are the ideas that drove my previous book, *Jack Stinger and the Haunting of Whitlock Manor*, into existence. If you've read it, these tales should be familiar to you. Consider them as Easter eggs.

For example, Jack Stinger was the pen name I would use if I ever became a full-time writer. Since I chose another creative career path (video production), I introduced Jack Stinger as a character instead. Thus, he makes his debut in *The Haunting of Whitlock Manor*.

Jack Stinger and the Haunting of Whitlock Manor was initially titled *Whispers Through the Broken Window*. I wrote a treatment and three sample chapters from the book to send to my literary agent in 2007. Unfortunately, the agency went out of business before the proposal reached them. So I stashed the book away and never picked it up again until the world shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Before we begin this journey, I leave you with some advice. Never give up on what you love doing in your spare time because it can transition into a full-time career later. To this day, I still receive rejections for my writings and films submitted to contests and festivals. As a professional, I learn from my mistakes and move forward.

I write for myself but allow others to enjoy it. If someone doesn't

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agree with my writing style or subject matter, I don't let it get to me. It's been this way for thirty-eight years. I'm thick-skinned, so I can take a criticizing punch. I'm always satisfied with the results once I finish a story and it's out of my hands.

Growing up, I was fascinated with horror and fantasy genres—mostly horror because that was me. Today I still enjoy reading a good horror story or book or watching a scary movie because this is me.

I am the real wolf man.

During a creative writing class in high school (1991–1992), one of my assignments was to write a story about myself in the present tense. This class was my favorite since I loved to write.

It was the only writing program I could choose as an elective (aside from the required English literature courses). I wrote my stories for this class using a word processor on an IBM desktop computer my parents bought me through the Home Shopping Network (HSN) advertised on late-night TV. The monitor on that thing was huge (bulky and shaped like an alien head). When turning in my assignments, I printed them on an oversized dot matrix printer. I miss those days.

The following is how I became a writer from an assignment I wrote at eighteen in 1992.

MYSELF



I

It's 1987, and a banana-yellow 1974 Camaro pulls into a parking space in front of Waldenbooks in Carrollton, Texas. Vince gives the throaty engine a couple of revs, lets it idle for a few seconds, then turns the key in the ignition and cuts off the motor.

In the passenger seat sits Vince's little brother, Phil. He's a skinny, blond-haired, blue-eyed twelve-year-old wearing glasses. He's a bookworm. A nerd.

Excited, Phil quickly unbuckles his seatbelt, pops the door lock, pulls the handle, and pushes the heavy car door open.

"What's the hurry?" Vince asks. "The store isn't going anywhere."

"I know," Phil says, stepping out of the vehicle. He peers back inside at his brother. "I'm itching for a new book. So hurry and get out. Let's go!" He slams the door shut.

Vince cringes before stepping out of the car. He peers over the hood, scolding Phil for slamming the door. "I'll give you something you can itch."

Something about the cold weather made Phil want to look at books that day while he and his brother were out and about.

The brothers walk into the bookstore and part ways. Vince heads to the magazine racks and checks out the automotive publications, while Phil scouts the books in the fiction area.

With both hands sunk into the pockets of his jeans, Phil walks up and down the narrow aisles, transfixed, looking for any book cover that would leap out and catch his eye. He migrates to the science fiction section, and toward the end of the aisle, a book finally leaps out to him: *Robocop*.

Phil's eyes light up as he reaches for the paperback and flips

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through it. “Damn!” he mumbles to himself. “Mom wouldn’t let me see this movie. I can read the book instead!” He holds on to the movie novelization, rounds the endcap, and browses the next aisle.

Approaching the horror section, Phil scans the rows for a book cover he hopes will catch his attention again. He takes it slow because the horror selections are limited.

Finally, he stops before a thick book with the image of a green-clawed hand protruding from a sewer grate. A paper boat floats in the street alongside the curb toward the hand. *IT* is the title, and Phil reaches for the book.

“Stephen King,” Phil says. “Hmm.” The book is heavy as he flips through the thin pages.

“Hey, dumbass.” Vince’s voice carries from the opposite end of the aisle, interrupting Phil’s moment. “I’ve been looking all over for you!”

Phil closes the book and walks toward his brother. “I’ve been over here the whole time. I’m ready to go.”

“It’s about time, shithead,” Vince gripes. “This place is for nerds.”

II

Over the next several months, Phil reads *IT*. His mind floods with imaginative ideas that could inspire his own stories. Reading the book also sparks an obsession with collecting Stephen King’s works, stories, and articles published in various magazines, like *Cemetery Dance*, *Weird Tales*, and *Writer’s Digest*.

Phil’s future career path becomes clear. He wants to be a professional full-time writer.

III

Phil sits at the dining room table at his family’s new home in Allen, Texas. His mother’s electronic typewriter is perched on the table before him. He’s determined to begin writing his first book.

Phil carefully loads a crisp sheet of typing paper into the typewriter, its keys stained from countless letters his mother has written over the years. With a deep breath, he gazes intently at the blank page, his mind whirling with possibilities. After contemplating for several minutes, he strokes the first key and begins typing the title of his

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first short story:

CURSE OF THE RED PAW

The Best Mystery Story

Written by Phillip Wolf

Little did he know, Phil's first short story plagiarized a Saturday morning episode of the *Scooby Doo* cartoon.

He's gotta start somewhere.

January 24, 1992 / Revised August 27, 2024

I was thrilled when one of my earlier creative writing assignments in school was to write a short story of at least ten pages. To me, the assignment was gravy. And so, on February 19, 1992, I began crafting *The Rat Hole*.

Looking back on the story, I realized it might not be well-written enough to publish verbatim. Some plot holes needed filling. Therefore, I changed the title and gave the story a facelift to fit the times. But it will always be *The Rat Hole*—a testament to my early days as a writer and a reminder of how far I've come.

CHEESY DEMISE



Within the cramped confines of Danny Benton's one-bedroom apartment, a piece of cheddar cheese rested on the trigger of a mousetrap. Its pungent aroma drifted through the hole at the base of the wall to lure in the curious critter with its irresistible scent.

Danny's ears had been relentlessly bombarded for a week by the sharp skittering of tiny claws across his bedroom floor each night. The sounds kept him awake and on edge. The urge to rid himself of this torment grew stronger with each passing night until it was all he could think about. Despite the fact that he was a habitual video game player, the repetitive noises had begun to grate on his nerves like never before. He couldn't understand why they bothered him. In some ways he felt like an old man, prematurely plagued by grumpiness and irritation.

In hopes of regaining peace of mind at night, he decided placing a mousetrap inside the hole in the wall might solve the problem. He was determined to silence the constant commotion once and for all. After setting the device inside the mouse hole, what followed were nights filled with anxious anticipation as he waited for the trap to do its job, longing for the blissful silence that would follow.

The hole in the wall was small and unassuming, resembling the arch of Jerry's beloved mouse hole from the classic *Tom and Jerry* cartoons Danny watched on Saturday mornings as a child. It held a nostalgia for him now. And the anticipation of dread, for he knew what fate awaited the rodent that dared succumb to the temptation of the delightful snack within the wall.

Danny lay in bed, the soft blue glow from the television screen filling the bedroom and casting shadows on his face. He scrolled

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through the endless options on Netflix, searching for something new and exciting to watch as he waited for the inevitable sound of the sharp crack of the hammer slamming against the mousetrap's wooden platform. It would startle him, piercing his ears like a whip. But in the end, satisfaction would prevail, and he could finally get some much-needed rest. He'd dread the sight that would follow and the mess he'd have to clean up—a lifeless mouse trapped and mangled beneath the metal jaws of the trap. It was a gruesome and unsettling image Danny did not look forward to seeing. But it must be done.

The same sounds simultaneously had woken him for seven consecutive nights. Despite keeping a clean and tidy apartment, there seemed to be no explanation for why this visitor had chosen his place as its nightly destination. Did the creature have a hidden nest somewhere in the walls? Maybe a neighbor's pet had escaped and found its way into his place.

With each passing minute, Danny's frustration grew, not because of the mouse this time, but due to the choices of movie titles. He had seen many of the movies already. If only he could afford other subscriptions like Max or Paramount+, maybe he wouldn't be stuck cycling through the same old flicks every night. But with a dead-end job and constantly rising inflation, it seemed impossible to get ahead. Financial pressure hung heavy on him, and he could barely afford his monthly rent for the past three years.

Another day of monotonous work awaited him tomorrow. Still, Danny knew he couldn't quit yet, not when he had bills to pay and a dream of one day making it out of this crappy apartment and into something better.

With a defeated sigh, he shut off the TV, settled under the covers, and closed his eyes. In just a few short hours, he'd start another day stocking dairy products at the supermarket with a fake smile while taking heat from disgruntled customers questioning him about out-of-stock products.

Waking to the soft, rhythmic pitter-patter of tiny feet scurrying across the floor, Danny sat up in bed. It was happening again—short bursts of sleep like he was power napping. He *must* get rid of that pesky rodent!

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Danny glanced at the digital clock on the nightstand beside him with blurred vision.

3:05 a.m.

He rubbed his eyes and yawned, mentally preparing himself for another night of dealing with his uninvited guest. His yawn was cut short when he witnessed the small creature dashing out from underneath his bed toward the hole in the wall.

Danny flung the covers off and hung his legs over the side of the bed. *Oh, I'm gonna get you tonight!* he muttered under his breath, focusing on the hole in the wall. His ears strained for the deathly *snap*.

But all was quiet.

Danny heard the faint hum of the internal fan in the laptop, which he had forgotten to shut down before turning in for the night.

He inched out of bed, careful not to make sudden movements that might startle the mouse. Danny moved slowly over to his desk in the corner of the room and opened the drawer, sifting through clutter until he found a small flashlight. With a click, a light beam illuminated the room, and Danny stepped closer to the mouse hole. He shined the light along the floor and crouched, aiming the light directly into the small hole in the wall.

"Ugh, not what I was hoping for," Danny said. He could see deep inside the hole.

It was empty. Not a creature was stirring.

Then it dawned on him the mousetrap was missing!

With a double take, Danny blurted, "Where'd the trap go?" He panned the flashlight left and right inside the wall, careful not to get his hand bitten should the mouse be hunched against the inner wall out of sight. Contracting rabies was not something he wanted to add to his already miserable lifestyle. "No way that thing could've moved the trap without getting whacked!"

Something again caught Danny's eye just before he decided to click off the flashlight and return to bed. A slight, furtive movement within the mouse hole at the edge of his vision drew his attention to a thin, twitching tail that flopped down inside the hole. Danny thought maybe the rodent had stumbled back and crashed, taking its last breath.

Without hesitation, Danny repositioned himself flat on the floor in a splatting position, his body tense with anticipation. He held his breath as he watched for the tail to move again.

A few seconds passed.

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No movement.

Was it dead? Had Danny finally rid his place of the annoying creature?

Danny went hands-free with the flashlight and placed the end of it in his mouth. "Gotta be sure," he mumbled with the flashlight between his teeth as he reached inside the small hole. His hand was too big to fit inside and clogged the hole at his wrist. He didn't even think about protecting his hand with a glove or anything.

Although his hand could not fit inside the mouse hole, Danny could've easily made the hole bigger by grabbing the inside edges and ripping apart the sheetrock. But why cause more damage over a stupid pest? He didn't own the place, so he'd probably be billed for the repair. No sense in adding yet another bill to the mound.

A mix of determination and curiosity quickly transposed to frustration as Danny stretched his fingers inside the wall as far as he could, hoping to at least touch the tip of the mouse's tail. He could pinch it between his fingers and remove it if he could feel it.

After an eternity of fumbling around inside the partition, Danny felt the rodent's tail against his fingertips. He pressed down, the creature's tiny muscles squishing beneath his touch. Then, excitedly, Danny withdrew his hand from the mouse hole while sliding his fingers firmly against the floor. If the mouse wasn't dead and he raised his fingers even slightly off the floor, he'd risk the rodent escaping, and he would be back at square one.

The flashlight hanging from Danny's mouth illuminated the tiny archway when he removed his hand from the mouse hole. His face lit with triumph. The tail curled outside the hole and rested against the baseboard. Proof of a successful catch.

Grinning from ear to ear, Danny pushed himself up from the floor and leaned against the wall with a sense of accomplishment. He set the flashlight on the floor next to him. Finally, a good night's rest for once. And maybe with some much-needed sleep, he would have a decent day at work, too.

Without further ado, Danny pinched the tip of the mouse's tail and pulled . . . and pulled . . . and pulled, like it was a thin, three-hundred-foot cable on a spool. It never ended!

This was not the little rodent's tail Danny thought he had caught. "What the hell is this?" he grumbled. It looked like a speaker wire he was pulling from the wall.

With a heavy sigh, Danny released the wire. He gave up. The

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flashlight lay abandoned on the floor next to him, its beam piercing through the darkness. He swiped the flashlight off the floor and clicked it off before placing it on the nightstand.

Danny crawled into bed, rested his head on the pillow, lifted one side to cover his mouth, and let out a scream muffled by the fabric. All the pent-up frustrations from the night's events were captured in his soft pillow, and the silence within the room was broken only by his ragged breathing.

3

The blaring alarm jolted Danny awake as if signaling a DEFCON 5 emergency. He slammed his hand down on the off button before the sun's rays even had a chance to peek through his bedroom window.

Turning to look at the small hole in the wall was a daily part of his morning routine. Weekday mornings were methodical, almost like Danny had been diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder. He would jump out of bed and yank the corner of his bed sheet back toward the pillows, making the bed quickly. Then he would shuffle across the floor barefoot to the bathroom, using his big toe to push open the door and let it hit against the door stopper with a satisfying thud. After taking care of business and washing his hands, he would spend a few minutes styling his hair before drying his hands with a towel. Next was breakfast—French toast sticks in the toaster oven and a tall glass of milk while scrolling through social media on his phone. After breakfast, Danny would shower and partially dress for work. He'd sit on the edge of his bed (always in a specific spot) and slip on his underwear, followed by socks. Then came brushing his teeth with exactly four passes for two minutes while still clad in socks and underwear—a perfect balance. The final step was slipping on his work uniform: black slacks, a long-sleeved white button-up shirt, and a tie—although not necessarily in that order.

But today, something backfired in Danny's routine, triggering an intense wave of anger within him. As he reached for the wire he had pulled from the hole in the wall, he realized it was gone. Just like the mousetrap, mysteriously missing.

"You sneaky little bastard," Danny growled, glaring at the tiny rodent's front door. He knew the culprit had snatched the wire back into its hiding place. Who else could it possibly be?

Frustration mounting, he grabbed his trusty flashlight from the

nightstand and knelt at the mouse hole. He turned on the beam with a forceful click, shining it deep inside the wall. He scanned every inch of the dank, dark space with intense focus, squinting and moving back and forth, hoping to catch even a glimpse of the elusive critter.

Danny shook his head in disbelief and clicked off the flashlight in frustration. “Ugh! You’re gonna make me late for work!” He rose from the floor and returned the flashlight to the nightstand. “I guess I’ll call the property manager to get pest control over here.” The thought of involving the apartment manager only added to his annoyance. Still, he knew he couldn’t continue living with this pesky intruder disrupting his rest at night.

4

Danny trudged inside the apartment later that afternoon, weary from another stressful day at work. He flung his keys onto the cluttered kitchen counter and slumped into the worn, discolored recliner with a heavy sigh. The weight of tomorrow’s impending repetition of the same mundane tasks added to his already mounting anxiety.

A glance at his watch revealed the pest control company was due to arrive any moment. He had barely made it home to let them in, and he couldn’t wait to finally witness the exterminator pulling that pesky mouse from its hiding spot in the wall. The thought of ridding his space of the rodent brought him a slight sense of relief.

With a determined spring in his step, Danny grabbed a broom from the kitchen pantry and tidied up the place. He didn’t like his apartment disorganized for guests, especially pest control. He worried they would blame him for the cause of bugs and mice from a filthy space.

Danny swept and dusted every nook and cranny of his apartment for ten minutes, determined to rid the place of dirt and cobwebs.

Just as he finished picking up the bedroom, a gentle knock sounded at the door. Danny rested the broom against the nightstand and traversed the living room. His eyes widened in surprise when he opened the apartment door.

A young woman stood before him with a smile lighting her face. Her long chestnut hair was pulled back into a ponytail, revealing rosy cheeks and bright hazel eyes. She wore a beige jumpsuit, reminiscent of a Ghostbusters uniform, with a bulging backpack slung over one shoulder. “Hi there, I’m Janet with Runaway Rodent,” she sang cheerfully.

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Danny couldn't help but feel energized by her infectious enthusiasm. His jaw slacked. The pest control lady was cute!

Janet maintained her irresistible smile. "You called for the removal of a mouse?"

"Oh, yes," Danny said, finally managing to focus. He swung the door fully open and gestured for her to enter. "Please, come in."

Janet was cautious when stepping into the apartment, as she always practiced. She glanced around, taking in the somewhat neat and organized space. This apartment starkly contrasted some places she'd been called to.

Danny watched her with a mixture of curiosity and admiration. She seemed so at ease, as if entering strangers' homes to catch rodents was the most natural thing in the world.

"So, where did you spot the critter?" Janet asked, still glancing around the living room.

"In the bedroom," Danny said. "This way." Leading her into the bedroom, he pointed down toward the mouse hole.

"I see," Janet said and removed her backpack. She set it on the floor near the bedroom doorway and crouched, rummaging through it. She pulled out a small flashlight, a small foldable cage, and a pair of latex gloves.

"You do this often?" Danny asked to break the silence in the room. He couldn't help but notice how graceful Janet looked, her movements fluid. "You know, catch mice."

Janet stood and spun to face him as she slipped on her gloves. "Every day is a new adventure in the world of pest control," she replied with a wink. "You never know what you might find." She unfolded the small cage and placed it on the floor beside the mouse hole.

Danny found himself smiling despite his earlier frustration.

With the flashlight in hand, Janet knelt and peered inside the hole in the wall, her brow furrowing in concentration as she scanned the dark crevice. Then, moments later, she murmured, "There you are, little guy." Her voice was soft yet determined.

Danny winced and blinked his eyes in awe. *No way she caught that thing already*, he thought. But his mind was not playing tricks on him.

Janet carefully reached into the mouse hole, her gloved hand disappearing into the darkness. Then, after a few tense moments, her face broke into a triumphant smile as she extracted her hand from the wall, holding a squirming mouse firmly in her grasp. "Here you go!" she said, rising to her feet. Janet raised the mouse to eye level.

“He’ll never bother you again.”

Excited yet dumbfounded at how quickly Janet caught the mouse keeping him awake the past several nights, Danny watched as she placed the rodent in the trap. She secured the small door to the portable cage, removed her gloves, stashed them in a pocket of her bag, and zipped it closed.

“How’d you do that so easily?” Danny asked, still in disbelief. He couldn’t help but admire Janet’s calm demeanor and skillful approach.

Janet let out a soft chuckle. “Years of practice. But it also helps to have a knack for it. Also, the mouse hole should be clear so you can seal it up. I didn’t notice a nest or anything as far as I could see.”

“Great!” Danny said. “Well, I can’t thank you enough for taking care of that little troublemaker.”

“It’s all part of the job,” Janet said warmly. She slung her backpack over her shoulder and carried the cage under her arm, the mouse darting back and forth with what little room it had to move. She stopped at the front door that Danny held open for her and turned back to him. “If you have any more pest problems, please let your landlord know, and they’ll contact us.”

Janet turned and stepped through the doorway. But Danny couldn’t let her leave just yet. He had to ask. “Wait!” he spoke up, his voice slightly breathless with nerves. “Can I... take you out for coffee or something? As a thank you, I mean.” He felt a rush of warmth to his cheeks at his boldness, but he couldn’t help but feel drawn to the beautiful woman before him.

Surprised, Janet turned back to face him, her eyes flickering with curiosity before a soft smile spread. “That sounds like a date,” she assumed, used to receiving such invitations from single clients. She held up her left hand and turned it to present the ring on her finger. “Sorry, my fiancé probably wouldn’t approve.”

Danny’s heart sank, but he tried hiding his disappointment. “No problem.” He forced a smile. “Sorry to have asked. Not sure what my gut was telling me.”

Janet returned his smile with a pleasant one of her own. “It’s okay,” she reassured him. “Have a nice day!” And with that, she turned and glided out of Danny’s life.

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Danny lacked the proper materials to seal the mouse hole. He'd have to make a trip to the home improvement store tomorrow after work to get what he needed. In the meantime, he improvised by placing a stack of books on the floor to block the opening. It was a makeshift fix, but at least it would do the job for tonight.

With a satisfied sigh, he prepared for a restful night's sleep and popped an antacid pill into his mouth, chasing it down with a glass of water. He knew all too well the consequences of indulging in a late-night frozen pizza—the fiery burn of heartburn and the uncomfortable churn during an acid reflux attack. But tonight, he was determined to avoid such discomfort and enjoy a peaceful slumber.

As Danny got comfortable, he rested his head on the plush pillow and let his eyes adjust to the dimly lit room. He strained to listen for scurrying or munching noises, but there was only silence.

He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

6

SNAP!

Danny jolted awake in the middle of the night. The sound reverberated through his room. He strained to listen for other noises, instinctively knowing they would come from the same place. *The mousetrap*, he thought grimly. *There must be another mouse!*

Janet had insisted there were no other pests behind the wall, but Danny couldn't shake off the feeling of unease. He reached for the flashlight on the nightstand and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Shining the light toward the makeshift barricade of books placed over the mouse hole, Danny cursed under his breath, seeing them scattered across the floor. His heart pounded as he directed the light toward the hole in the wall. To his horror, the wall had burst apart, the sheetrock in a pile on the floor. And then Danny saw them—a pair of glowing yellow eyes staring back at him from the darkness within the large hole in the wall.

Before Danny could register what was happening, a massive rat's sharp claws curled the inner partition as leverage to pull and wriggle itself free, dragging behind the broken mousetrap clamped at the tip of its tail. The mousetrap looked like a clothespin compared to the size of the severely oversized rodent.

This was no ordinary rat; the creature was enormous, its matted fur caked with dirt and grime, its teeth sharp and menacing. Danny

felt a chill run down his spine as realization dawned on him—he had not been dealing with a small pest all this time. It was something more sinister and terrifying, a demon living behind the wall like a secret hidden from sight. It seemed the huge rat used mice as scouts like bucks do with does, sending them out in the open first to be sure the coast was clear.

Danny's pulse quickened as the giant rat's eyes fixed on him. He sprang into action without a moment to lose, adrenaline coursing through his veins. He grabbed the broomstick he left leaning against the nightstand when he cleaned the apartment before Janet showed up. With white knuckles from his tight grip, Danny faced the monstrous rodent.

The giant rat let out a guttural growl, its claws flexing as it prepared to lunge at Danny. With a swift movement, the creature charged toward him, its foul breath filling the room. Danny dodged just in time, narrowly avoiding the sharp claws that grazed past him.

Heart pounding, Danny knew he had to act quickly before the rat could strike again. Summoning all his courage, he lunged forward with the broomstick, aiming for the beast's head. With a sickening squelch, the broomstick connected with one of the rat's glowing yellow eyes and pushed it deep into its skull.

Danny clenched his teeth and gave the broomstick a swift twist. The oversized rodent collapsed with its legs splayed on the floor, a final exhale of breath seeping from its gaping bloody mouth.

Danny slowly released his grip on the broomstick, his hands and legs shaking. He stared down in horror at the giant rat. Its matted fur was soaked in the puddle of blood gushing from its skull. And the stench. The awful, sour stench made him want to puke.

But Danny's feeling of retching where he stood was suddenly interrupted by a voice from behind.

A feminine voice echoed in the room. "Hey! Are you okay?"

Danny's vision blurred as he stared down at his wet hands, the icy liquid seeping into his skin and numbing his fingers. His body trembled from the cold. His toes felt like blocks of ice. Slowly, he turned to the source of the voice and squinted to try and make out who it was. "Janet?" he croaked.

"Um, yeah? What's wrong with you, Danny? You've been cleaning

THE REAL WOLF MAN

up this mess for over fifteen minutes now. We have customers to take care of.”

Danny slapped his numb hands over his face, trying to shake off the exhaustion plaguing him for days. The mysterious noises in the walls of his apartment had robbed him of precious sleep, leaving him constantly on edge and struggling to keep his grip on reality.

As he blinked away the blurriness in his vision, Janet’s figure slowly came into focus. But something was different about her. Instead of her Runaway Rodent Pest Control jumpsuit, she wore a crisp white button-up shirt and loose-fitting black slacks. A name badge pinned to her chest proclaimed her as “JILL S. STORE DIRECTOR.”

Impatiently tapping one foot, she snapped at Danny, “What’s taking so long? I need those milk and eggs stocked pronto. Chop chop!” Her sharp gaze scanned down to Danny’s feet.

Following her line of sight, Danny’s heart sank as he saw the mop handle lying on the ground, surrounded by a pool of spilled milk. There was no large rat with a gouged eye. Nearby, a gallon jug lay toppled over where it had fallen from the shelf. He sighed heavily as he turned back to face Janet with a defeated expression. “I’m on it,” he muttered in a monotone voice.

Jill’s scowl deepened before she spun on her heel, her shoes squeaking loudly against the sticky floor as she stormed around the corner.

The nauseating stench of spoiled milk and harsh cleaning solution assaulted Danny’s nostrils. He picked up the mop handle and resumed mopping inside the dairy cooler. Each stroke felt like an eternity during his never-ending shift at the grocery store.

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During my senior year of high school, I took a co-op class. This meant attending school for only half a day so I could work and gain valuable experience. I made \$5.00 per hour.

I still recall my first day. I was trained to be a cashier, and since there were no conveyor belts yet, my trainer had to keep pulling the basket of groceries closer to the counter for me to scan them properly. My instinct was to leave a gap between the register and the basket, but my trainer kept reminding me to stay close and keep the process efficient. “Work smarter, not harder,” he’d say.

I would take a step toward the basket, lean in to grab an item, take a step back to the register to scan it, push it down the counter for bagging by the clerk, and then repeat with the rest of the items in the basket.

I also met some interesting people when I worked retail. I remember vividly a lady who caught my eye with her well-endowed figure. I couldn’t help but take my time ringing up this customer’s order. When she handed me her check at the end of the transaction, I had to hold back my laughter when I read her last name: “Titless.”

Playing it safe, I politely asked how to pronounce her name because we were required to thank every customer by name if it appeared printed on their receipt or they wrote a check.

“How do you think it’s pronounced?” the lady replied with a knowing smile.

Feeling flustered, I blurted out, “Tit-less?” Her large tatas were right there before me, her cleavage exposed beneath an open-chest tank top. I didn’t mean to offend her.

To my relief, she corrected me and said her name was pronounced “Titles.” I completed the transaction and wished her a nice day (by name, correctly) before moving on to the next customer.

PHILLIP WOLF

No matter how much I learned about the grocery industry, I never thought I'd spend sixteen years working for one company. I worked my way up to a service manager position and on to the person in charge when the store director was away. I took on every task imaginable: ringing up purchases at the register, bagging groceries, restocking dairy, frozen foods, and produce, working overnight shifts to replenish shelves, wrapping meat and slicing cold cuts, unloading trucks, crushing boxes and creating bales, managing office tasks, overseeing a team of over eighty employees, hiring new staff members and providing thorough training, even becoming the district photographer and earning numerous awards for my dedication.

I was capped at \$14.85 per hour during the last two years, and those days were especially tough as I grew to hate my job because of the absurd micromanagement.

When I was an overnight stocker, I wrote a story about my experiences working in retail. The story that follows is me venting about the industry. But it will always hold a special place in my heart for incorporating bits and pieces from my experiences with my first job.

Would I ever work in a grocery store again? Absolutely not.

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