

Daddy was at work, Emmy was at university, Lilly was on her way home from secondary school and Becky was getting ready for basketball. Mummy was rushing around the kitchen throwing together her “instant sort-of-kind-of chicken, mushroom and pea risotto”.

She wiped the mushrooms, cut the chicken into large pieces, put the bowl of chicken stock into the microwave and set it to warm. She turned the oven on and put the casserole dish on top of the stove. Then she opened the pantry to get the oil, the rice, an onion, some bay leaves and some garlic.

A rank and musty odour filled her nose, something like a rotten banana that had been left in an old gym shoe for a fortnight; the unmistakable smell of mouse. Mummy peered behind the jars and boxes and along the spice rack without moving anything. She couldn't see anything but she did hear rustling.

There was the mouse, inside a bag of organic, home-dried bay leaves that Grandma had given her just last weekend. Obviously no-one had told the mouse that bay leaves were a mouse repellent.

Becky leapt into the kitchen, mimed a slam dunk and gave a cheer.

Mummy said, “Good shot! Now; listen very carefully, I will say this only once. Get me a plastic shopping bag and pass me the longest tongs from the drawer. Quickly.”

Becky's imaginary fans disappeared. In a flash she found a bag and the extra long barbecue tongs.

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“Give me the tongs,” said Mummy. “Hold out the bag so that it’s open. I’m going to put something into it. If you scream I will hang you on the clothes line by your ears. It is important that you don’t scream or drop the bag.”

Becky held out the bag, her eyes wide. “What is it?” Her voice quavered. Mummy reached into the pantry with the long tongs, picked up the bag of organic, home dried bay leaves AND the mouse, dropped them into the shopping bag then, with her other hand, gathered the shopping bag from Becky’s hand, holding it closed.

Becky did not scream.

“Excellent work,” exclaimed Mummy as she tied a tight knot in the top of the supermarket bag. “Now I need an empty ice-cream container and its lid plus a dinner plate.” Becky reached into a cupboard and got an empty Hokey-Pokey ice-cream box and its lid. The box was yellow and lid was blue. She put it on the bench and opened the drawer to get out a dinner plate.

Mummy put the supermarket bag that held the smaller plastic bag with the organic, home-dried bay leaves and the mouse into the ice-cream container, carefully fitted the lid then placed the dinner plate on top. She then pulled the bowl of oranges, mandarins and lemons over and carefully balanced it on the plate.

“There is no way that mouse can escape. You finish getting ready, I’ll finish dinner and we should still be in time for the game!”

Mummy chopped the onion and garlic, sautéed it, added the rice and some old shop-brought bay leaves then tipped in the warmed stock all at once.

When it came to a simmer Mummy tucked the chicken pieces and the whole mushrooms down in the rice, put a lid on the pan, turned off the gas, opened the oven door and, using the oven cloths, carefully put the pan of sort-of-kind-of chicken and mushroom risotto into the oven and closed the door. She adjusted the temperature, washed up the chicken cutting board and the knife, wiped down the onion board and stacked the rest of the dishes on the sink.

“Ready,” said Becky as she came in to the kitchen, “How will we get rid of the mouse?”

“That’ll be Daddy’s pleasure when he gets home,” laughed Mummy. “You and I have done our bit.” She reached up to the top of the fridge and grabbed the writing pad and pen to make a sign that said (in very large block letters);

THERE IS A **MOUSE** IN HERE.

DO NOT OPEN

Mummy and Becky went to basketball. Becky got one two-pointer and two free throws through the goal ring so they were happy even though Becky’s team didn’t win.

When they arrived home Lilly was in the kitchen looking at the sign.

“What are you going to do with the mouse?” she wanted to know.

“Daddy’ll have to deal with it when he gets home,” said Becky.

“How’d it get into the ice-cream box?” asked Lilly.

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“I slid into the kitchen pretending to shoot for goal and all Mummy said was “Good shot” and didn’t say *anything* about me sliding on the floor or being in the kitchen without shoes. Then she told me not to scream and to get a plastic bag and the extra long tongs.”

“Did she talk in that really calm even voice like she used when the red-bellied black snake was underneath the hammock I was sitting in when we were at Mallacoota?” asked Lilly.

“Yep! I was a bit scared but I held out the plastic bag and Mummy used the tongs to pick up the freezer bag, the mouse and the bay leaves and dropped them all into the bag I was holding. I didn’t scream. Then we put it into the ice cream container and balanced the other things on top so that it couldn’t escape.”

“I want to be part of this story!” Lilly exclaimed. “So I’ll kill the mouse!”

“How?” asked Becky. “I know – you could drown it.”

“Na, messy. I’ll take it outside and drop a brick on it!” replied Lilly.

“Out!” said Mummy as she opened the oven. “I’ve a vat of boiling fat here!”

“Let’s find a brick,” said Lilly. She took the torch off the side of the fridge and they turned on the verandah light and went into the back garden where they found an old white brick down the side of the house.

“I’ll watch from the dining room window just in case the mouse gets away,” said Becky.

Lilly went into the kitchen where Mummy was putting the dinner back into the oven after stirring in the frozen peas.

“Daddy and Emmy will be back in 10 minutes,” she said. “Dinner’s in 20 minutes, the table needs to be set and Becky still has to have a shower.”

“Won’t be long,” said Lilly as she carefully lifted off the bowl of fruit and the dinner plate and picked up the ice-cream container and carried it outside. Becky shut the door behind Lilly and the mouse in the bag with the organic, home-dried bay leaves, in the supermarket bag in the yellow and blue Hokey-Pokey ice-cream box and went to the window.

Lilly put the ice-cream box on the concrete, took off the lid and jumped back. The mouse didn’t leap out. It didn’t even scabble about in the bag. Lilly took hold of the large knot Mummy had tied and lifted the supermarket bag on to the concrete. Then she picked up the brick and dropped it on to the bag, the organic, home-dried bay leaves and the mouse. The bag split, pop! the brick hit the concrete, bang! and broke in half and Lilly screamed. But the mouse was dead.

Becky laughed. “You screamed Lilly! Clothes line – by your ears!” Then she opened the back door and passed Lilly the dustpan and brush. Lilly brushed the supermarket bag, the small plastic bag with the organic, home-dried bay leaves and the mouse on to the dustpan, tipped them into the garbage bin then threw the ice-cream container and its lid on top. She handed the dustpan and brush to Becky and rushed immediately for the bathroom where she washed her hands with a great deal of soap.

Becky laughed again. “Clothes line by your ears!” she chanted as she went off for her shower.

When Daddy and Emmy came home they were full of stories about the trains, the traffic, the rain and crowds and it wasn’t until they were all sitting at the table eating the sort-of-

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kind-of chicken, mushroom and pea risotto that Mummy, Becky and Lilly got to tell their parts of the story about the mouse and why there were no organic, home-dried bay leaves in the dinner.

“I’m sorry I missed it,” said Emmy.

“I’m glad I missed it,” said Daddy. “Thank you Mummy and Becky for catching the mouse and thank you Lilly for getting rid of it! This is one story I’m pleased not to be in!”

“Well ... it’s not actually over,” said Mummy. “Apart from doing the dishes, tonight I need help to take everything out of the pantry and wash down all the shelves and the jars. There’s been a mouse in there you know!”

So, after the dishes were done, while Emmy worked on her essay on 16<sup>th</sup> century musical notation, Lilly worked on her geography assignment on iron ore in the Pilbara and Becky read her reader about volcanoes, Daddy took everything out of the pantry and washed and dried the shelves while Mummy wiped all of the jars and lids, dried them and passed them to Daddy to put back on the shelves.

By the time everyone was in bed that night all that was left was this story.