

*The Town Drunk*  
*Presents*

**SQUEAK**

*Amanda Davis*

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“Listen,” said the repairman, “if you want that boiler fixed, you got to do something about them rats.”

“I don’t have rats,” I told him. I’d been saying the same thing for fifteen minutes. “I’ve never had rats. When I moved in I put down traps, just in case—I’ve never caught a thing. I’ve never seen a dropping. Never heard a squeak. Please. *I need my boiler.*”

I hated to beg, but after three days of cold showers, I was ready to break.

“I know what I seen,” he said, with the calm stubbornness of the small-minded. “I know what I felt. Couldn’t pay me enough to go back down there. Kill the rats. Then we’ll talk.”

“*There are no rats,*” I said. But he wasn’t kidding. He refused my offer of double his rate.

So did the rest of the phone book. In a small town like this, word spreads quickly among the brotherhood of boiler repairmen.

That afternoon I deposited a box of rat poison in the basement, and called the repairman to tell him so.

“You got a corpse yet?” he said.

“Well...”

“Call me when y’do.”

It is incredibly difficult to kill an imaginary rat. In the morning I searched every corner of the basement, knowing that my only hope of a hot shower was to turn up something dead. I found six rotten potatoes, my Christmas decorations, and a dried-up spider perched in a perfectly-preserved web. No corpses. No rats.

I called the repairman and screamed, “THERE ARE NO RATS.”

“I know what I seen.”

I told him what I thought of his work ethic. He told me what he thought of people with rat-infested basements. When it became clear that we were not going to solve each others' problems, we hung up to fume privately.

Quaking fury and days of washing dishes in freezing-cold water made it hard to see clearly. *He wants rats?* I thought. *I'll get him rats.*

I needed bait.

Eight weeks of leftovers and some out-of-date bologna went into a bucket along with the rotten potatoes from the basement. I let it all warm up on the back porch until it developed a real bouquet; then I added another half-box of rat poison. I would have dead rats in my home if I had to import them myself.

I put the bucket in the middle of the basement floor, settled down on the staircase with a can of Coke, and waited.

The musk of ancient dust was thick in my nostrils. I sipped my soda, enjoying the silence. *No squeaks*, I thought. *No scratching. No droppings.*

*No...*

*...rats?*

The boiler shuddered.

I sat up.

The pipes on the boiler shook, keening as rust rubbed metal, and I heard a slow grating of brick against brick. Very carefully, I put down my Coke and half-stood. The grating stopped. Something squeaked.

And a clawed, furry hand, as thick around as the boiler itself, stretched out across the concrete.

The space behind the boiler was a crush of fur with twin red sparks. The shadow twitched; one claw, yellow and worn as a mammoth's tusk, hooked the bucket and dragged it, scraping, back into the corner behind the pipes and tank. The boiler resumed shaking.

Wild giggles rose in my throat like bubbles in a bright champagne. No droppings? Maybe those hadn't been rotten potatoes after all. And of course the traps never caught anything. What were they going to do? Clip on to one bony toe?

The squeal of teeth on metal shuddered through the basement. There was a clatter, like dull rusty bells, and the chewed-up bucket rolled out from behind the boiler. A thin spiral of poisoned compost trailed behind it.

The grating began again, loud, then diminishing.

Faint, far-off squeaks.

Then silence.

*He was right*, I thought, as I edged up the stairs. *By God, he was right.*

The boiler repairman would have his corpse.

But I was going to need a lot more poison.



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