

SARAH MCENEANEY

ACT with Me (AB), 2014
Acrylic on gessoed linen, 36.25 x 48 in



COURTESY TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

MELISSA SANDERS-SELF

Where Everything Disappears

Family, pets,
and pest control

*It's true that every time you hear
a bell, an angel gets its wings.
But what they don't tell you is
every time you hear a mousetrap
snap, an angel gets set on fire.*

—Jack Handy

One day at cat-feeding time I opened the cabinet, bent over, and lifted out a new can of Friskies salmon pâté. Two little mouse poops fell off the top. My first response was a pure uh-oh. When our boys were little our house was pet central, and at one point, along with our current cat, Oola, we had two other cats, a newt, a snake, a lizard, and a cage of rats who had their own room in a dormer upstairs. But the very first pet the boys ever owned was a mouse, a little black mouse we had bought in a weak moment at a pet store. He was meant to be python food, but we got him a cage and a wheel and a water dropper and we called him Silly Billy. He provided hours of endless fun, some based on the tales of Beatrix Potter.

My husband, Nigel, is British and he would take Silly Billy out and hold him and let him run up and down the boys' arms while Nigel narrated, turning his already beautiful English accent into various mouse voices—*Silly Billy is confused—should he run up Luke's neck and tickle him? Should he? Should he go back to the Lego house instead? Or take a little trip around the BRIO tracks? On the train? Ohhhhhhh look at Silly Billy! He's having such a good ride!* The boys giggled until they cried and collapsed exhausted and then Silly Billy went back to his cage. We loved Silly Billy. Until he escaped, and populated a kitchen drawer of pot holders with twenty Silly Billy babies, and Nigel decided there had to be limits. I can't remember how he got rid of all those mice because it was twenty years ago, but somehow when the mouse poops fell on the floor that day I knew immediately they were going to be a bigger problem than Silly Billy's progeny ever had been.

I fed Oola then opened the cabinet wider and crouched down eye level with its dark recesses of jumble. That entire four-foot-by-three-foot-deep space has a reputation as the cabinet where everything disappears. The cat food is right in the front, but behind it I put things I don't care if I never see again. Mismatched Tupperware, cake pans I am unlikely to ever use, and archaic appliances like 1960s mixers with beaters I used as a child and inherited or antique iron meat grinders I do not know why I own. There in the far back corner I saw a telltale ripped up napkin and I knew after twenty years, we had mice again.

For most of those twenty years our two other cats, Spider and Panther, both hunters of small rodents, had kept

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the property free of all mice, rats, groundhogs, and the occasional mole. They were good about dropping them on the front porch mat to make sure we knew what they'd done and we made an effort to approve. We shoveled the dead into the green cycle and petted our adored velvety felines, but then, one summer when she was too old to be out all night, Spider was ripped to pieces and eaten by a coyote at the stream in our neighbor's backyard. A year later, Panther succumbed to feline leukemia from fighting with other boy cats, and our youngest son Luke, a Silly Billy and all-around animal lover, followed his older brother, and left our house for college, so for several years it had been just us and Oola, who had never expressed any desire to catch anything, only a fierce habit of trying to look like she could if she wanted to.

The cabinet is next to her eating spot, near the door. She's nineteen, which in cat years is apparently equal to ninety-three human years, but she acts about forty-five with a little dementia. She has the pride of a cat in her prime. She climbs trees, runs, arches up, and sidesteps in front of the dogs being walked in our neighborhood with such regularity that some people have taken to crossing the street before they get to our house so their pups don't have to face the eight-pound, spiky-furred Oola who acts tough but has a dysfunctional cat secret known only to her owners—she is actually a vegetarian, (apart from the salmon pâté cat food) and her only hope in tangling with a dog would be to hiss it to death or scratch its eyes out since she could go down with one good chomp if any sharp-nosed collie or annoyed German Shepherd really felt like it.

A few times I've embarrassed her by scooping her up from fighting stance, apologizing to the dog owners, and carrying her inside, trying to prevent her from being hurt by her own hubris. She has paid me back for this kindness by hydra breathing and leaving some serious scratches on my forearms and hands, which I must then explain to everyone who knows I'm capable of cutting myself—No, it wasn't me, just my vegetarian cat on a rampage.

That night, I told Nigel I thought we had mice in the kitchen cabinet and he immediately took action.

"Do we really have to do this?" I asked. My first impulse was to pretend the mouse wasn't there at all. I regretted having shared the information as I watched Nigel sit down on the floor and systematically begin removing everything. Out came a stack of pink cat food cans, the avocado-colored mixer, the mixed-up Tupperware. "I'm not sure if we do have mice, and honestly, we don't even use this cabinet."

"Are you crazy?" Nigel scowled at me. "We can't have mice breeding in the cabinets. It's unsanitary. Tomorrow they'll be in every wall in the house. Get the cat."

Nigel on certain subjects, like household maintenance, is very pragmatic and a little macho—I *must protect my house and home*. Part of me thought he was making sense but mostly I felt betrayed and angry at myself for telling him. He would never have known. He never fed the cat.

I found Oola outside, lying completely flat on the warm stone path, sunbathing.

I scooped her up and brought her inside to see Nigel had finished emptying the cabinets and across the back was further evidence of a mice infestation: ripped paper towels, more poop, bits of plastic bags scrunched into tiny mouse pillows.

"There's more than one mouse in here. Give me the cat."

Nigel and Oola have an odd relationship. He tends to tell her not to do certain "bad" behaviors, like pee on the firewood stacked next to the fireplace, or lounge on top of the DVR box, or sleep in between us at night. He uses a sharp tone and she will slink away from the seductively warm DVR, or scooch down to the foot of the bed, or run away fast if he catches her peeing. But later, in order to make sure he knows who's really the boss in their relationship she makes certain to vomit in his shoes, or on the DVR when he's not home, or on his pajamas if he leaves them on the floor. I think she has a sensitive stomach actually, which perhaps explains her avoidance of wild game, but she has never thrown up on anything of mine. She knows who feeds her.

"Oola is not going to catch those mice," I warned him, petting her head, stroking her whiskers.

"Yes, she is. She may be crazy but she's still a cat. Put her in the cabinet."

I did what he asked because I knew resistance was pointless.

"Go on Oola, sniff out those mousies, kill those mice." Nigel stroked her and pointed her headfirst toward the back of the cabinet. Oola behaved exactly as I expected: she paced, sniffed, and jumped out. Nigel put her back in. "She's a CAT," he said to me, in a tone somewhere between angry and authoritative. "They kill mice." He shut the doors. "Go on, kitty." He tried to coach her, mouth to the latch. "Get those mousies, Oola, go kitty."

I sighed. Oola meowed, disliking the shut doors. She began scratching to be let out.

"Her favorite food is buttered asparagus. She's not going to catch mice." I felt vindicated for all I hadn't said, and relieved. This time Nigel sighed and opened the door. Oola jumped out, purring.

He looked at her with an emotion just short of loathing, full of disappointment.

"You've come a long way from the Adventures of Silly Billy," I said, annoyed.

"Silly Billy lived in a cage. Until he didn't." Nigel stood up, wiped his hands on his jeans, and then began washing them at the kitchen sink. "We have to do something about this. And we have to put this stuff somewhere else. Throw it out, why don't you?" Nigel defers to me regarding all the stuff we've accumulated because he knows I might have a fit if he throws away some random item I think I might care about. He was probably happy the opportunity to clean out this cabinet had presented itself. He's sensitive to me, but I could see he was going to do something about these mice. "I'm going to the hardware store," he announced, drying his hands on the dishtowel.

"Fine. But get the kind of traps that don't kill the mice."

"What?"

"They have traps for mice where you can keep them alive, like, live traps, and then we can take them somewhere else."

"Like where? On a trip? Maybe a Carnival Cruise?"

"No, like up to the university. In the woods. Where they can live in the wild."

He gave me this look that clearly said *you have to be kidding me, but I know you're not, so I will buy traps that keep the mice alive*. What he said was:

"Great idea. So they can become hawk and gopher snake food."

"Whatever. At least they won't die here."

I should say, this mouse invasion happened about two months after Nigel and I had found my mother dead at her house near ours. She had died rather suddenly under unnatural circumstances. She was just fifty-nine. At first we all assumed it was an intentional suicide, but she was the kind of person who would have left a note and there wasn't one, so we thought perhaps it was an unintentional suicide, as in, she had been flirting with death for a while and it seemed Death in the guise of a combination of Ativan, Vicodin, alcohol, and malnutrition finally got her. When we found her she had been dead for two days, and though she was a beautiful woman, she was not a pretty sight.

"I will get the traps that don't kill mice." Nigel kissed me and I felt like crying, which wasn't that unusual.

"Thank you," I whispered into his neck.

Nigel bought the live traps and began trapping the mice and taking them up to the university. He complained when he came home from the hardware store that the men

there had laughed at him and that it was ridiculous and embarrassing. We went to dinner parties where he made it a funny story—how he had to trap a mouse a day because I wouldn't get traps that killed the mice and his task was Sisyphean since the mice seemed to have established themselves in infinite numbers inside our unused cabinet. I was the straight woman in this comedy routine. I revealed to the assembled how pointless it all was—since we weren't actually using the space and didn't need it, why couldn't the mice just LIVE there? Who were they really bothering?

I noticed as we shared this story not all our friends were laughing. Some gave me looks of pity mingled with incredulousness. And they tended to tap Nigel's shoulder after dinner and whisper in his ear that *he* was right. A few people even insisted we stop messing around and call a professional.

"A professional mouse-killer?" I countered, "Who does that?"

"People who are in business to protect your property values, that's who. Exterminators. People who know mice carry hantavirus. They're vermin."

Our friends stopped just short of saying, *What's wrong with you?* Because of course everyone knew about my mother. I saw them look at Nigel and feel bad for him—poor perfectly reasonable guy who had to deal with this crazy grief-ridden, mouse-loving wife.

But it wasn't that I was a crazy mouse lover. I didn't want to catch them and play games with them and turn them into my friends. I wasn't planning to replicate Silly Billy. I wanted them to leave. But on their own terms. Every time he caught a mouse and took it away I sat down next to the cabinet, opened the doors, and talked into the recesses of shredded napkins and wadded plastic bags.

Nigel's taken your friend—maybe your lover, your son, or daughter?—to a new destination, far away from you. You should leave here, because he fully intends to catch all of you and you don't stand much of a chance with your tiny little rodent brains and all. If you leave now, you can choose your own new home. Maybe the back shed? No one ever goes out there and I'm sure you can forage food from the compost pile in the garden. But please don't hang around in here. I doubt it will work out for you.

* * *

Months passed. I was in therapy to deal with my grief over my mother and somehow I mentioned the mice.

"So you've moved your stuff out of the cabinet and allowed the mice to occupy that space?" said my therapist from her cushy red plush chair.

"Well, it's not like I really need that cabinet . . . it's hard to reach. Everything just disappears in there." I shrugged my shoulders and the therapist leaned forward.

"But do you see how that's what you did with your mother? You let her occupy all the space in your life that was yours and pretended to yourself that you didn't really need it. Remember when she told you she was going to commit suicide and that you were strong enough to handle it?" She paused, waiting, and I recognized her tone as the one she used when I was supposed to make a connection but all I could think of was that particular conversation with my mother. I had answered my mother, *yes, she was right, I was strong*, and *yes, I would handle it*, but I didn't know then that it would feel this bad. I had presciently and kindly told her there was no way to know how miserable I would be if she killed herself, to which she said, *Well, if you're really miserable, you can kill yourself too*. An answer I thought about.

I wasn't sure where the therapist was going with this. I shrugged my shoulders, and she sighed, continuing.

"Your mother made your life about *her* needs. She occupied space that belonged to you. Do you see the pattern here? That's YOUR cabinet."

"But I don't care about that cabinet. I don't need it."

"You need to work on caring about reclaiming yourself for yourself. Starting with this cabinet."

"Reclaiming myself from the mice?"

"Reclaiming yourself from patterns of behavior that are dysfunctional. Functional people don't let mice live in their cabinets." She said this gently, smiling, but I felt suddenly patronized, as if underneath her kindness there was condescension.

Why? I thought, *Why can't the mice live there?*

I was confused. Obviously, no one I knew thought letting the mice live in the cabinet was a good idea, but from my point of view, they weren't bothering me and they were there and we had to accept it. No one thought my mother should take drugs and drink and die either, but it happened. People had to learn to live with things they might

not have chosen or might not like. It wasn't possible to control what happened; we could only control our responses.

A few weeks later, the mice began to make forays to the cat food bowl next to the stove and several had been seen at night skittering around the kitchen floor picking up scraps. Nigel complained.

"Look, I've taken forty-three mice to the university and they just keep coming. They're probably talking to their friends next door and telling them, *Come to Nigel's house, he gives great taxi rides to greener pastures*." He was trying to make it light, but I could tell he was genuinely fed up. He sighed, "I feel like we need to just end this . . ."

"End it how?"

"We have to do something more complete, more serious and permanent."

"Like?"

"I think we need to start trapping them with kill traps, so the word gets out in mouse community that it's time to leave. Or maybe use some poison and just get rid of them all. Or call an exterminator." He shrugged his shoulders and smiled his most appealing *please* . . .

"NO! We can NOT do that!!!!!" I was beside myself. "I swear to God I will leave you if you kill one single mouse! I'm not kidding." I felt a profound need to protect the mice in that cabinet. To think of poisoning them created a solid wave of horror inside my body, that same feeling I had when I ran screaming from my dead mother's bedroom, out across the lawn to the edge of the meadow, threw myself down on a hill of earth and grass and screamed the most primal scream, a universal wail of loss. That feeling was just under the surface, driving this wave of dread. "WE ARE NOT KILLING THESE MICE," I yelled.

"Okay, okay! Fine! I'll keep being Nigel's Mouse Taxi." He could tell I was ridiculously upset and I could tell I was insane by the way he was treating me—normally he was not this nice about things in the house he wanted changed.

I didn't dwell on it. I had reconciled myself to the idea that eventually he would catch every mouse and this Mouse Time would come to an end. All things did. That was enough for me. The days passed and I didn't think about it. We had agreed to share our space with some mice and Nigel had a nice weekend taxi shuttle going for them.

One day, I was at work and Luke called asking me

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to pick him up downtown. He was coming home for the weekend, which was exciting. At that time, Luke was a god-send to me—philosophical about my mother, his grandmother, understanding, and attentive, he often called just to ask how I was doing. I doubt there was another nineteen-year-old on the planet who was as sweet and kind to his mother. I met him at the bus station and drove him home. As we walked up the driveway Oola rose from her sunbathing spot on the stone path and ran to greet us.

"She's hungry," I said, putting my key in the lock and opening the door. Oola ran in between my feet and straight toward her dish by the cabinet. Luke was close behind me.

It all happened fast in a blur, as the cat ran in—she and I both saw a strange object next to her food bowl—a bright yellow rectangular square with a live mouse, stuck, twitching and screaming on it. Of course Oola was distracted by this twitching creature and immediately batted the trap, gluing her front paw securely to the top of the rectangle. She began to twirl backwards, hissing around the kitchen, her paw in the air, trying to shake it off from her soft pink pads as if she had stepped in tar or honey. She used the other paw to bat at the screaming mouse. It was like a very sardonic Tom and Jerry episode in front of us; the cat bouncing around on three legs—one paw raised in the air—so comical, as if she were waving to us with her glue-caught mouse. It should have been funny, but it wasn't.

Luke freed the mouse, a little grey fluff, twinkly eyes, white stomach, and long whiskers. Luke was petting his back to calm him down, but he was still sticky so we washed him again with Pert, blow-dried him carefully on low, and put him back into the cabinet with some cheese and crackers.

I screamed, just like I screamed when I saw my mother dead, I screamed from fear, shock, and disbelief. I screamed because there were no words for how upset I felt. Just screams.

Luke rushed in and scooped Oola up cradling her in his arms like a baby. He gently began to detach her paw, pad by pad, from the trap. I stopped screaming. Luke freed the cat and she ran to lick herself in the living room. The mouse had stopped screaming too and Luke and I surveyed his state, glued by four feet and his fat white belly.

“Oh my God.” I thought the mouse was doomed. I thought about how Nigel must have planned to be home before me and how he might have been doing this for weeks and if I went and searched the trash I might find mice glued to rectangular traps all dead from dehydration and starvation hidden in a trash bag.

I decided to divorce him.

“Calm down, Mother, we can fix this.”

“Why would Nigel do this? He’s not supposed to hurt them! It’s inhumane.”

“Let’s just focus on this little guy at the moment. We can talk to Dad later.”

Luke got a sponge and dishwashing soap from the sink, some olive oil, and a flat knife. I watched as he worked up some oily suds and slid the knife under the teensy-tiny mouse claws to set the creature free. He asked me to bring the shampoo from the bathroom to the kitchen sink. Luke freed the mouse, a little grey fluff, twinkly eyes, white stomach, and long whiskers. Luke was petting his back to calm him down, but he was still sticky so we washed him again with Pert, blow-dried him carefully on low, and put him back into the cabinet with some cheese and crackers. And a new pile of paper napkins to make a cushy nest.

“Thank God you were here,” I told Luke.

“I think you need to talk to Dad. And maybe you need to go away for a few days? Like, to a spa or something?”

“Why? So he can kill all the mice when I’m gone? Why would you say that? You just saved that mouse.”

“Of course I did. I don’t want to kill mice. But we need a better solution. Dad can’t live with mice in the kitchen, and you shouldn’t either because it’s not good for you. And you definitely can’t live with him killing them. So, new plan needed.” I could tell he was upset too, but in a different way I didn’t quite understand.

Later it occurred to me he was upset at the way his family was changing. One tragic death wasn’t enough of a problem; when he left us alone he came home to find I was keeping a colony of vermin in the kitchen on purpose.

I found Oola licking her paw in the living room. I picked her up and inspected the glue on her claws. She tried to scratch me and I put her outside.

Nigel came home and Luke and I explained the trauma of the trapped mouse, the screaming, the fear, the imminent death we had saved the creature from.

“Sorry,” he shrugged his shoulders. To his credit he didn’t defend himself. “I’m just so tired of catching them and driving up to the university.”

“It was horrible what you did!” I said, but part of me understood and thought, I probably won’t divorce him for this.

I forgave him.

* * *

That night Luke went out with friends and once Nigel had fallen asleep, I let Oola sit on the DVR until she was warm and relaxed and then I pulled her off and carried her into the kitchen, opened the cabinet, and sat down with the cat on my lap, ready to finish with the mice.

So, that was it, little ones. You need to leave now. I need my cabinet back. My family is fed up. We can’t keep doing this.

Nigel woke up and came into the kitchen and saw me sitting by the cabinet stroking the cat, talking to the mice.

“What are you doing?” he asked, taking in the scene.

“Just asking them to go. You know, to just leave us alone.” I started crying, thinking about all the years I had tried desperately to keep my mother safe and protected, while wishing she would just leave me alone and now that she was gone it was as if I had failed not only to protect her but also to realize even the worst day with her was better than living with her forever gone.

Oola jumped out of my arms.

Nigel sighed and squatted next to me. He put his hands on my shoulders.

“Look, I’m sorry about your mom,” he read my mind. “But we’ll get through this.” He lifted my chin and kissed my nose. “It’s only a bunch of mice. *Silly Billys!*” He used his Silly Billy voice and made me smile.

I wish I had a believable ending to this story—for instance, I came to my senses and we hired an exterminator, or Nigel continued to catch every single mouse until they were eradicated, but the truth is, what actually happened was the mice left of their own accord and suddenly, the very next day after the glue trap incident. And they never came back. Somehow the word spread through the mouse community that our house was off-limits and that was that. No more mice. Luke thought maybe the human touch, or the smell of blow-dried Pert fur made them seek a new location. But who knows?

I waited a few months and then I cleaned out the cabinet. I wore a mask to prevent exposure to hantavirus and I thought carefully about what to put into those deep recesses that would be well stored there. First a few boxes of my mom’s stuff I couldn’t throw away but wished would disappear. Then I put back all the Tupperware that matched, the never-used cake pans, the 1960s mixer, and the meat grinder. The cat food returned in stacks, nice

and clean on the reachable shelf, and I saw there was still empty space. Space I could fill with all kinds of things. Things I wanted to disappear.

Melissa Sanders-Self is a continuing lecturer in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She produced and directed the documentary film *Writing Women’s Lives*, which aired nationally on PBS, and she has published short fiction with New Rivers Press, New Brighton Books, and Doubleday. Her first novel, *All That Lives*, was published by Warner Books in 2002. Her second novel, *The Stone Mother*, was a finalist for the Bellwether Prize in 2006. She is currently working on a memoir, *Seizure: A Love Story*.