

OF MEN AND MICE BY JAMES KABLER (NOVELLA-PROBABLY MIDDLE GRADE)

Alan and Karter wanted a legendary adventure.

Pam and Hannah wanted to see the pigs rumored to live on the top floor.

Patch had nothing better to do.

What started out as a day of big talk and little action, turned into an adventure none of them will ever forget.

Chapter One

In a dark room, in a hollow wall, in a big house, in a small town, a loud noise woke Patch from a deep sleep.

It was a roaring sound rarely heard so early in the morning.

In the dim light, Patch saw little brother Carl across the room, hunched in the corner at the top of his bed.

Carl clutched his tail with both hands, ears folded back.

His eyes were wide like searchlights, frantically scanning the room for the source of the monstrous growl.

There was the door, bookshelf, toy box, a beast with the arms of victims dangling from its mouth—The little mouse gasped, and then realized it was his dresser, with the shirt drawer open and sleeves hanging out.

When his scan reached Patch, Carl let out a sigh of relief, and whispered.

“Patch, what was that noise?”

“It’s Ok kid. That was just the Young Man’s car. He left early.”

Carl released his tail, and slid back under the “Amazing Mouse” blanket Grandma gave him for Christmas.

“Patch?”

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“What?”

“I can’t go back to sleep.”

“Me either, but we should stay in here until Mom and Dad get up.”

Carl climbed out of bed and ran across the room, dragging Amazing Mouse behind. He jumped in next to Patch, and pulled the blanket tight.

“Patch?”

“What?”

“Are Alan and Karter really going to steal food from Abby’s dog bowl today?”

“That’s what they say.”

“In the middle of the kitchen, in the middle of the day, are they crazy?”

“Don’t worry. Those fellows talk big, but they’ll chicken out. Alan will come up with some excuse to save face. He always does”

Carl was quiet for a few seconds.

“Patch?”

“What now?”

“If they do try to steal Abby’s food, will you go to?”

“Well, if Alan is dumb enough to do it, Karter will be dumb enough to follow, and I’ll have to go along.”

“Why?”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“Why?”

“Ok look. The guys and me are starting middle school this fall. In sixth grade, reputation is everything. I don’t want to be known as, ‘the one who wimped out.’”

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Carl tried to object, but Patch continued.

“It’s all good. Abby’s a cool dog. She’s just curious. Worst case scenario, we get soaked by that big slobbery tongue.”

Carl wasn’t so easily convinced.

“What about the Woman? She’s in the kitchen all the time. What about that cat, Haley? She’s so quiet you won’t hear her coming. That cat will do more than just lick.”

“I know. I know. Alan and Karter know too.

The sound of voices rode a tantalizing aroma in from the kitchen.

Patch gave Carl a punch on the arm “Let’s go, Squirt. Mom and Dad are up, and I smell cheese omelets.”

Carl sat up and sniffed. His heighten fear of a possible monster had slowly diminished from the moment he saw Patch. Now, the smell of Mom’s omelets overpowered what little fear lingered.

This made way for the usual awareness a little brother has, of the torment a big brother might inflict at any moment.

In an instant, Carl knew what was coming, but it was too late.

Patch pushed him back down and slowly rolled across, “Steamroller!” to the edge of the bed, and up.

When Carl finally peeled himself out of bed, he scrambled to the “beast” dresser and rummaged for clothes.

Patch pulled on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt that read, The early bird might get the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.

“What does that mean?” Carl asked, pulling on a pair of stripped pants.

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“Nothing. Well something, but it’s not for little kids like you. When you’re my age, you’ll understand.”

Carl stopped digging for a shirt, and looked up at his brother.

“Uncle Quincy told me there are whole houses where the mice don’t wear clothes.”

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Their mother’s brother Quincy is quite a character. He’s a fountain of useless information, a barrel of laughs, a jack-of-all-trades, and a storyteller extraordinaire. Naturally, the boys think he’s the greatest thing since Cheez Whiz.

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“Uncle Q’s right. There are lots of houses where none of the mice wear clothes. They don’t have jobs, or go to day camp. They don’t talk, and they also don’t have Mom’s cheese omelets for breakfast.”

Carl closed his eyes, and tried to imagine such a house. “I wonder what that would be like.”

Patch chuckled. “You don’t have to wonder. Just show up at Mom’s breakfast table without clothes, and see what it’s like.”

At the thought of that, Carl grabbed the first shirt he saw, put it on quickly, and headed for the kitchen.

Patch blocked the door. “Hey Goober, you don’t wear striped pants with a checkered shirt. You’re starting first grade in the fall. Do you really want to be, ‘the kid who dresses like a rodeo clown’?”

He pulled a pair of jeans from Carl’s top drawer, and turned them right side out,

“Here, put these on.”

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While his brother changed, Patch checked himself in the mirror.

Carl finished, and backed stealthily out of the room.

“Last one to the kitchen’s a dung beetle!” he said, closing the door behind him.

The two boys crashed into the kitchen, each with his sights on the first cheese omelet.

Mom was ready for them this morning. The table was already set with two plates of omelet and two glasses of milk.

Carl hopped up in the chair across from his father. He lifted the edge of his omelet, peered under, and found it lacking. “Can I have syrup please?”

Their mother, Larue, was at the stove preparing a spinach omelet for herself.

“You most certainly may not young mouse. Between your Grandma, and Uncle Quincy, you boys get too many sweets.”

Their father, James, sat at the head of the table reading the back half of yesterday’s newspaper.

*

Since James is always up and out before the day’s paper arrives, he has a habit of reading the front half after dinner each evening, and the back half the next morning, with his coffee and toast.

James holds an important position in the mouse community. He is the duly appointed Chief of the Safety and Security Department. Which includes himself, four officers, a secretary, and a cockroach trained to sniff out D-Con.

The SSD patrols all three floors of the house, plus the attic.

They have numerous responsibilities, but their main task is to find traps, and trip them. Once tripped, they split the cheese. It’s one of the perks for taking on such a risky job.

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The best thing about cheese is you can trade it for almost any other food or useful thing.

Except for the teachers, and old Doc Thomas, almost all of the adult mice in the house make their living gathering and trading.

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