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### Practice Groundhog

“Why is that thing inside of my house?” Steph said. She stood in the front doorway, her eyes blazing with blue fire and her face red like a tomato. She was still wearing her baby blue scrubs from the early shift at the hospital. Light poured in behind her, casting a long shadow into the beige room. Callum was startled out of his golf magazine and jumped up from his spot on the couch.

“How was work?” Callum said, fidgeting with the buttons on his polo.

“There's a wild fucking hedgehog in my house!”

“Groundhog.”

“What's the fucking difference?”

An open live animal trap sat on the coffee table in the center of the living room. From the trap, a trail of dirty pawprints lead across the carpet and up onto the ottoman. There, frozen like a statue, stood the groundhog.

“Callum, I need answers. Now please.”

Steph's eyes were a pair of lasers boring into Callum's skull. Callum scanned the room, attempting to find anything to focus on but his enraged wife. He reached into the pockets of his jeans and fished out a pink object about the size of a tooth brush.

“Well, I found this in our bathroom after you left this morning,” Callum said, sheepishly holding the positive pregnancy test up for Steph to see. Steph’s face flushed from red to pink.

“When were you going to tell me?” he said.

“You were still asleep, Cal, and I was already running late. I didn’t want wake you up. I was going to tell you when I got back, of course, but then I saw this mess.”

“Then why did you leave it out on the counter?”

Steph opened her mouth, but before she could say a word the groundhog sprung from the cushion and bolted into the kitchen.

“That thing is getting mud all over my house!” Steph said. “What made you think bringing a wild animal into the house was a good idea?”

“He’s a groundhog, and his name is Gary,” Callum said. “You told me you wanted me to get rid of him last night, but I kind of like him.”

“Gary the groundhog. Really Cal,” Steph said “Well, *Gary*, was eating my zinnias and burrowing under the porch! I thought you would relocate it or something normal, but instead you adopted a fucking wild animal! How does that make any sense?”

“I figured it would work out. We’ve been talking about getting a pet for a while now. Besides, we used to watch those YouTube videos of people with pet raccoons and opossums all the time!”

“Those were probably raised in captivity, Cal! I meant a cat or a dog or a gerbil or something.”

A loud crash sounded from the kitchen, followed by the sound of shattered ceramics scraping across the linoleum tile floor. Steph's face returned to a deep shade of red. She barreled to the living room closet, thrust the door open, and snatched a broom from it. Steph marched toward the kitchen, brandishing the broom like a baseball bat. Callum scrambled after her, hoping to prevent Steph from committing groundhogicide. Before he could catch up, however, Steph erupted in curses and outrage.

"The little shit is eating Christofern." Steph said.

Sure enough, there stood the groundhog in a pile of spilled soil, munching away at Steph's house fern. It paused for a moment, as if to acknowledge its audience. As if deciding he didn't care, Gary continued munching. Steph began to step forward, raising the broom over her head, but Callum intercepted her, grasping the broomstick with both hands, barring Steph's path.

"Get out of the way," Steph said, her teeth tightly clenched. "I am going to kill Gary."

"Hold on, hold on," Callum said. "I know he's eating your fern--"

"Christofern!"

"Christofern. But just give Gary a chance. You only just met him, and he's only been here for about an hour--"

"An hour of tracking mud all over the place and murdering my house plants."

"Maybe he could be good practice for taking care of a child. I'm just saying. Maybe this isn't the best first impression, but I see this a perfect opportunity to build more responsibility," Callum said.

Steph stared at him for a moment. She seemed to be trying to decide whether to kill the groundhog or kill Callum. Having made up her mind, Steph wrestled the broom out of Callum's

hands. Callum braced himself, expecting to be whacked upside the head, but instead Steph stepped past him toward the groundhog. Gary screeched, a sound neither Steph nor Callum and ever heard before, like the cross of a whistle and a growl. Steph stopped dead in her tracks. A rank, musky odor began to perforate throughout the kitchen, and Gary scurried under one of the skirted chairs in the breakfast nook. Callum coughed a few times before buttoning the top of his polo and pulling it up over his nose. Steph, who was closer to the blast zone, began to gag and made a run for the powder room. The broom clattered to the floor. Callum scooped the weapon up and went to check on his battle-wounded wife.

“Hey, Steph?” Callum pulled his wrinkled shirt off of his nose and tapped lightly on the door with the broomstick handle. “You alright?” Through the bathroom door, Callum could hear the sink running. “Look, I’m sorry, Steph,” Callum said. “I should have known better than to” bring the groundhog into the house. It was a dumb idea, but in some way, I thought taking care of a pet would help make me a better father, and I guess bringing the groundhog into the house was some stupid way of me getting back at you, even though you really did nothing wrong. I’ll reset the trap and I’ll relocate it myself.”

The sink shut off and Steph slowly pushed the door open. The color had drained from her face and bags formed under her red eyes. Her shoulders slouched forward; all of the adrenaline gone from her body. She looked like the ghost of a drowned sailor. Callum realized how tired she must be from working all day, on top of all of this.

“I’m going to go take a nap,” Steph said. “This whole gopher thing isn’t going to work out.” She paused. “I’m sorry I hadn’t said anything sooner about the pregnancy test. I just wasn’t sure how you would feel. We haven’t talked much about having kids, but-”

“It’s alright Steph,” Callum said. “I shouldn’t have sprung that on you right when you got home. I’m actually excited to be a father. We’ll save it for later, you should get to that nap.”

Steph smiled, tearing up. The married couple hugged each other. A faint scratching noise could be heard from the breakfast nook, but they both ignored it. Unentangling each other, Steph made her way toward the stairs and Callum went to return the broom to the closet. As Steph trudged up the stairs, Callum grabbed the trap and moved it into the kitchen, pointing it toward the breakfast nook like a cannon. He reset the trap and left some leaves from Christophern as bait hoping Gary might come back for seconds. He then cleaned the kitchen and living room, knowing that Steph preferred it when the house was spotless.

After a bit, Callum returned to the kitchen, wielding the battle broom in case he had to force Gary out of the house himself. It was oddly chilly, as if someone had left a window open, but they were all clearly shut tight. The cage remained empty aside from the bits of Christophern. Taking a deep breath and pulling his shirt over his nose once again, Callum made his way toward the breakfast nook. He poked around with the broom under the chair where Gary had been hiding, but he felt nothing. Maybe he wasn’t checking deep enough. Callum pushed the handle deeper under the chair, but was shocked when the handle continued past where the wall should have been.

Callum pulled the broom back. He grabbed the chair and pulled it aside. Behind where the chair had been was a four-inch hole through the drywall, the insulation, and even the vinyl siding. Callum dropped to his chest like he was on fire. Through the hole, Callum saw Gary, gnawing away at Steph’s zinnias.