

# Robin Black

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an excerpt of

## *Tableau Vivant*

THERE shouldn't have been mice in late June. Not inside. It made no sense. Later, after the first frost, Jean wouldn't question their presence. The cottage was in the country after all. That was the point of the cottage, and in the country there are field mice—tiny, silken creatures seeking winter warmth, like everyone else. They weren't even so terrible then, not when expected. They were—an expression Jean's husband Cliff liked to use—part of the deal. If it weren't for the droppings and the general sense of God-knows-what on their feet, they would almost be amusing. One could flick on the light and watch them scurry through invisible exits in the seam of floor and wall, bumping into one another like Keystone Cops. Sometimes, though, a single mouse would stop, eyes so round and uniformly black, so like plastic toy eyes, that it was a mystery to Jean how she knew the creature was gazing into hers—what exactly was that sense of connection?—and a mystery too why, when all the others fled, this one stayed.

But that was the winter, when there was snow on the ground and arthritis in her knuckles, and this was early summer, when field mice were supposed to be in the fields.

Like so much else recently, this was wrong.