

Abbott had been living at the Desert Sands for three years when the administrators summoned his daughter, Megan, for an emergency conference. They were concerned about Abbott's ability to look after himself. Megan, who was on the road with a theater troupe half the year, had to fly in from Denver to meet with them.

Two representatives from the board escorted Megan up to her father's apartment. They sat in straight-backed chairs from the kitchen while Megan perched on the edge of the sofa with her hands on her knees. Abbott, feeling uncomfortable with the conversation, removed himself to the bedroom.

"We're worried that assisted-living might not be enough for him anymore," Dr. Curtain said. She had thinning brown hair, and she gently smoothed it with the palm of her hand.

"He barely communicates," Mr. Rose added. "He hardly leaves the apartment, and he refuses to speak to anyone. He doesn't seem to recognize anyone, anymore. Plus, he's not cleaning up after himself."

"It looks clean in here," Megan said.

"It's not messy," said Mr. Rose.

"But it's not clean, either," said Dr. Curtain. "He's not looking after himself the way he should be. Most days he has to be reminded to come down to meals. And when he does come, he frequently smells of urine or . . ."

Dr. Curtain turned around to see Abbott now leaning against the wall by the bathroom.

When he noticed them watching him, Abbott stood upright and pretended to look at the pictures hanging next to him. Photos of his wife, of Megan as a young girl, of the three of them posing together with the cast of *The Pirates of Penzance*. Before retiring in the late '90s, Abbott

had designed sets on Broadway. Even now, he received notices and offers for tickets from the various theaters he used to work for.

“He wears a diaper,” said Megan. “Don’t half the people here wear diapers?”

“But we can’t be expected to remind him to wear it,” said Dr. Curtain. “Or to change it. Or to remind him to eat every day.”

“Maybe I can set a timer for him,” said Megan.

“Does he ever cook for himself?” Mr. Rose asked.

“I like to cook,” said Abbott.

“You haven’t cooked in eight years, Dad.”

“I cook all the time!”

“Then why did I just find four pounds of hamburger rotting in your fridge?!”

“Because I was going to cook it!”

Megan turned to Mr. Rose: “He seems pretty communicative to me.”

“You’re the only one he recognizes,” he said.

“Dad, do you know who these people are?” Megan asked him. “Do you know their names?”

“Yes!” Abbott folded his arms and walked back into the bedroom.

“He’s not bothering anyone is he?” Megan asked.

“Several neighbors have complained about him opening the door in his underwear,” said Mr. Rose.

“Which he’s since stopped, am I right?” Megan looked back toward the bedroom. “There haven’t been any complaints lately, have there?”

“I still think he would benefit from something like a nursing home,” said Dr. Curtain.

“But I still don’t understand why it is, exactly, he needs that level of care.”

“At the very least, he needs someone to come in once a week to clean his apartment,” said Dr. Curtain.

“And make sure he bathes,” said Mr. Rose.

“I can arrange for that,” Megan said.

“And you should know,” Dr. Curtain said, “if he starts to lose weight, I may force the issue.”

“If he starts losing weight,” Megan assured him, “I’ll move him myself.”

When the doctor and Mr. Rose left, Abbott returned to his seat on the sofa. He turned on the television and reached for a bag of almonds on the end table. Several nuts fell out of a hole in the bottom.

“I think you’ve got mice, Dad,” Megan told him.

“I don’t have mice!”

“We need to get an exterminator in here. There’s a bag of apricots in your cupboard that has holes in it as well.”

“I wish you’d stop buying me apricots,” Abbott said.

“I thought you liked them.” Megan turned her eyes on the television. “I have to get back to Denver,” she said. “I have a flight to catch.”

“Why?”

“I told you already. We’re out there another week before going to L.A.”

“Stay out of L.A.”

“Are you going to be OK when I’m gone? Do you think you’d feel more comfortable in a place where they gave you more attention?”

“I don't know these people, and I don't care to,” said Abbott. “What do they know?”

“You've known them for years, Dad.”

“Everyone here keeps to themselves, and I keep to *myself*.”

Megan got up from the couch and retrieved her suitcase from the bedroom. “Try not to forget to eat, all right? I programmed your alarm clock to go off at noon and six. When you hear it ring, it means it's time for you to go down to the cafeteria. Got that? I'll call you when I get in.”

Abbott kissed his daughter on the cheek, closed the door behind her. At six, when the alarm rang, he wandered into his bedroom, turned it off, and returned to his seat in front of the television.

Before going to bed, he noticed a mouse with white spotted fur in his kitchen. He threw one of his shoes at it, and the mouse scurried behind the television. Getting to his feet, Abbott grabbed a six-inch chef's knife from the drawer by the oven and carried it back to the sofa. When the mouse appeared again, poking its little nose out from behind the entertainment unit, Abbott held his breath. He waited for it to crawl just a little farther out, just a little farther—

WHAM!

He was pulling the knife from the wall when his next-door neighbor, Nancy Alexander, came knocking. She had tattered bronze hair and her face was all but upside down. Because he was in his underwear, Abbott answered her through the door.

“I thought you killed yourself!” she cried.

“A book fell out of my hand,” he said, peering through the peephole.

“Are you still up?” she asked.

"I just wanted to get this book," he said.

"You should be asleep! Are you insomniac? Do you have something? I can give you something..."

Abbott told her Goodnight and turned from the door.

The next morning, with his shoes untied and a wad of bills in his pocket, Abbott walked briskly through the lobby of the Desert Sands toward the exit.

A uniformed attendant held the door for him. "Beautiful weather for a walk, isn't it?"

"I'm buying glue traps," Abbott confessed, and pushed past.

When he returned, the attendant again held the door for him. "Sir, if you have mice or rats in your apartment, I should probably tell someone in facilities."

Abbott pretended to be deaf and made for the elevator.

Following the instructions on the package, he dropped a spoonful of peanut butter into the center of each of the three glue traps and set them around his apartment: one in the middle of his kitchen, one on the carpet by the bathroom, and one against the wall by the entertainment unit. Abbott sat on the sofa and turned on the television, but he was too excited to watch any of his programs. In an effort to make himself invisible, he pushed deeper into the cushions, crossed his legs and folded his arms.

Shortly after eleven, the mouse emerged, scurrying along the wall next to the entertainment unit. It ignored the closest trap and made a beeline for the one in the kitchen. Using its hind feet to balance on the edge of the tray, it proceeded to span the pool of glue by resting its front paws on the island of peanut butter. Abbott watched it eat for several minutes before he jumped to his feet and grabbed his knife from the drawer. The mouse bolted to safety

behind the entertainment unit but reappeared after Abbott returned to his seat. This time it focused on the trap by the bathroom, again using the island of peanut butter as a foothold.

Abbott winged his knife at it.

The glue trap—without the mouse—was sent flying into the bedroom. Abbott spent a good hour learning that, while soap and water are useless in cleaning certain kinds of glue (especially when they get into the carpet), rubbing alcohol dissolves them on contact.

The next morning, Abbott visited the arts-and-crafts lounge on the third floor, a room filled with industrious seniors bent over knitting work, needlepoint, and watercolors. A volunteer was instructing others how to press modeling clay into the shapes of angels, automobiles, and a miniature version of the Eiffel Tower.

Abbott demanded glue and construction paper. The lounge regulars tried to steer him toward the modeling clay, but Abbott insisted he needed a cardboard box, an X-ACTO knife, and some string.

“He doesn’t want to make *angels*,” one of the men said.

“What do you want to make, Abbott?” His neighbor, Nancy Alexander, took him by the hand and led him to the drawers where the supplies were kept. “We made masks last week. Would you like to look at some templates?”

Abbott shook his head.

“Did you want to do something with papier-mâché?” she asked. “I can cut strips for you?”

“Oh, leave him alone,” said a woman with a Band-Aid on her nose and pink glasses. “He’s a big boy, he can make what he wants.”

Abbott pulled colored paper, permanent markers, and white glue from the drawers. "I need a cardboard box," he said.

Nancy went to the trash room to find one for him. When she returned, Abbott used a knife to remove the top of the box and one of the walls. He then carved windows in the sides and back, made a winding staircase and a second-floor landing with Popsicle sticks, and used construction paper for the details: a yellow wainscoting, marble fireplace, and the framed portraits of men and women cut from magazines.

"He's making a diorama!" cried the woman with the Band-Aid on her nose.

"I think it's a set," said Nancy Alexander. "Abbott used to make sets for the theater. Didn't you, Abbott?" She touched him lightly on the arm. "Are you making a set for a play?"

Abbott ignored her. He cut out a door at the top of the landing and made a hinge next to the stairs.

"I think it's definitely a set," said a man with a hook rug in his hands.

"What play is it?" the woman with the Band-Aid asked. By now Abbott had a group of onlookers huddled behind him.

"I don't know," Nancy Alexander said softly. "What play is it, Abbott? Is this for a particular play?"

"Something by Ibsen, I'll bet," said the man with the hook rug.

"No, it's definitely American," said another man.

"Well, it'd be easier to tell if he gave it a little more character."

"Oh, shush," said Nancy Alexander.

"What character?" Abbott suddenly growled over his shoulder. "It's Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."

“Did you hear that?” said Nancy Alexander. “He said it was Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.”

“Doesn't look like Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.”

Nancy Alexander stood up straight and browbeat the man. “I beg your pardon, it looks exactly like Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.”

Using his index finger, Abbott pressed lightly on one end of the second-floor landing, which immediately gave way and dangled from the hinge. “I'm gonna put the glue trap right under here,” he said.

“What glue trap?”

“I want to make a set, too,” said the woman with the Band-Aid.

The following day, Abbott returned to the arts-and-crafts lounge. This time, he brought his own cardboard box. The woman with the Band-Aid informed him she was making a set for A Midsummer Night's Dream. “It's going be pink and green, with flowers and trees everywhere.”

Abbott looked at her and frowned. “I'm doing Shakespeare,” he said.

“The same as me?”

“No.”

“Well, which one?” Nancy Alexander wanted to know.

“Richard III.”

“Oh, he's dirty,” said the woman with the Band-Aid.

Abbott assumed she was talking about him and laughed. “Joe Papp thought the same thing. I worked on this very set with him, once. He told me I was a *scoundrel*. He wanted me to play Richard myself, until he saw me act.”

“Who's Joe Papp?” the man with the hook rug asked from across the room.

“Who’s Joseph Papp?!” Abbott said, raising his voice. “Joe was a good friend of mine,” he told Nancy Alexander. “Drinking martinis, one time, he told everyone in the room I was his favorite set designer. ‘No one but Abbott Garfield knows how to make a decent fricking set anymore,’ he said.”

“And I’m sure he was right,” said Nancy Alexander.

“He was drunk,” said Abbott. “He thought I’d make a good Richard the third, too, until I read for him.”

On the third day, Abbott made a scene from *Buried Child* by Sam Shepard. By now, he had three others making sets with him, and by the end of the week all but a few of the arts-and-crafts regulars were designing scenes from their favorite plays.

Every morning for three weeks Abbott woke up, went downstairs to get breakfast—he’d started eating on a schedule again—and spent the rest of the day immersed in the handiwork of his old profession. Then in the evenings, after most of the *Desert Sands* had gone to sleep, Abbott went to the theater. Night after night, he was audience to a new drama, every one of them death-defying and suspenseful.

When Megan returned, she found twenty-two different sets spread around the floor of Abbott’s apartment. And whether equipped with a trapdoor, a guillotine, or a collapsing parapet, every one of them was designed to kill, capture or maim.

Megan picked up a set for *12 Angry Men*. “A little courtroom drama, Dad? What’s with the razor blades?”

Abbott wrinkled his lips. “To kill the mouse when he climbs into the jury box.”

“What mouse?”

Abbott pointed to a spot next to the witness stand. "This is where I put the peanut butter, and the mouse triggers this when he steps on it. But he always comes at it from behind the bench. He's a sneaky devil."

"Where'd you get the mouse from?"

"I didn't get him. He comes out of the wall there. And in the bedroom."

"Didn't you tell someone to call an exterminator?"

"Why? So *they* can kill him? I already got a piece of his tail in *The Iceman Cometh*."

"So these are all mouse traps?" Megan picked up another for *The Crucible*.

"I wanted that one to explode in flames," Abbott said.

"Dad, why don't you just put out some spring traps like a normal person?"

"I did." He showed her *Barefoot in the Park*.

"I just spoke to Dr. Curtain downstairs. She said you were making progress. She said you've been making friends. She didn't mention your new hobby. Hasn't someone been coming in to clean for you? What the hell is this one?"

"That's *Titus Andronicus*."

"Oh, Jesus."

"I got that photo of the Coliseum from the travel section."

"That's very nice, Dad." Megan went around picking up the sets, putting them in the closets and stacking them on Abbott's bed. "On our way out to lunch, I'm going to have them send up an exterminator."

"I can kill him."

“You shouldn't be living with rats. And you shouldn't have this shit all over the floor. You're going to trip on it and break something. You're going to get the administrators after you, again.”

On their return from lunch, they met the exterminator on his way out of Abbott's apartment.

“You couldn't kill him, could you?” Abbott said. “I told you he was smart.”

“I baited for it, put some rodenticide in the wall, but it might take a week.”

“He's too clever,” said Abbott. “You have to use your wits. You gotta be ruthless.”

“My dad's been living with it for a month now,” Megan tried to explain.

“I don't think it'll bother him anymore,” the exterminator said.

After Megan had gone, Abbott rearranged the sets around his apartment, baited them with fresh peanut butter, then climbed onto the sofa and waited. He turned on the TV, but kept the volume down low.

He did the same the next night. And the next. He re-baited the traps, huddled on the couch with the TV down low, and waited.

At the end of the week, when there was still no sign of the mouse, he picked up all the sets and hid them in his bedroom. He cleared the floor of every trap and dropped plain spoonfuls of peanut butter onto the naked kitchen linoleum. He then did the same with pieces of cheese and a slice of bread from the cafeteria.

But he never saw the mouse again. The mouse never returned.

After several days of leaving food around, he visited a pet store, bought a white mouse with spotted fur and set it loose in his living room. He spent hours that night trying to clean glue

off of it with rubbing alcohol, after it fell through the landing in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The night after that, it was cut in two in *The Master Builder*. And Abbott gave up.

Nancy Alexander and a few of the others from the arts-and-crafts lounge stopped by his door a few times. They invited him to make sets with them again, to make turkeys out of pinecones and gingerbread houses. Abbott only watched them through the peephole—and declined.