

Spring has sprung him from his mouse trap

By Paul Zakrzewski, Globe Correspondent | May 8, 2005

After my wife and I rented our ground-floor apartment in Jamaica Plain last fall, we discovered so many problems with the place that we joked it was the perfect trial run for owning.

Water-damaged walls, backed-up pipes, broken light fixtures, even a flooded basement -- we faced them all down fearlessly in our first three months, trying not to bother our long-distance landlord.

But the hardest problem to fix was the smallest. It arrived one morning last October, after a particularly frigid night, announcing itself all over our kitchen counters, sink, and floors.

At first, I decided to get rid of the mice myself. After all, I hadn't electrocuted myself installing a new light fixture, had I?

The clerk at the hardware store on Centre Street led me to the array of options: hinge traps, glue traps, poison bait.

"Your best bet is to go with old faithful here," he said, scooping up a standard snap-trap. Its simple combination of wires, spring, and wood seemed old-fashioned but ingenious, like the light bulb in Edison's time.

Instructing me on how to clean off the bits of gore before reuse, he dropped it in my hand. His steady gaze over his bifocals suggested that any other approach would be, well, unmanly.

I cleared my throat and grabbed a more expensive model

resembling a giant clothespin.

"My wife will find these easier to use," I said.

I baited them with cheese and peanut butter and, to my surprise, it worked. A couple of mornings later, I discovered the first mouse, its tiny haunches and tail trailing out from the trap like the Wicked Witch of the East. I had to admit, it was smaller than I'd expected.

But my sympathy was short-lived. After I thinned their ranks by two more, they wised up to me. No matter what I used for bait -- a crumble of quiche, an inch of spaghetti -- I couldn't catch another. They even taunted me, peeking out from beneath the stove one night as my wife and I sat down to eat breaded chicken.

On the next trip to the hardware store I bought a giant glue trap, which looked more like a cardboard Skinner box (though without any therapeutic value). At this my wife put her foot down. She wouldn't be woken in the middle of the night to the horror-show sounds of a doomed mouse dragging the box across the floor.

As we continued to find evidence of our mice problem each morning, on our dish rack, our countertops, under the microwave, I called our landlord. Conveniently, he lives in Kansas, which may account for the chummy tone he adopts in the face of our various emergencies. We had encouraged the mice by providing warmth and food, the landlord explained, as if the solution might be to turn off the heat and stop our weekly trips to Roche Bros.

I had to face it -- I was beaten. I called an exterminator, who promptly took issue with my nomenclature.

"We don't call it exterminating anymore," said the pest controller.

Despite the gloomy tone, he had an impressive sales technique; like a Hawthorne character as reinterpreted by David Mamet. His

encyclopedic knowledge of mice was something he wielded until the client could do nothing but submit. For \$175, he'd bait and seal up any holes they used.

And what about when they died in the walls?

An unpleasant odor, like bad lettuce, for a day or two -- and it would be over, he assured us.

Cheapskate that I am, I balked at the price and went about finding and sealing the mouse holes with steel wool myself. A day or two later the pest controller left a message. More breathless this time, he reminded me again how even at this very minute the mice were spawning uncontrollably and would do so until he came to root them out.

For a day or two the steel wool worked; the coast -- and our floor -- was clear. Then they were back, fouling up the kitchen. I finally had to admit to defeat. Despite the brave face I put on for my wife, I wondered where I'd put the extern . . . uh, pest controller's number.

I never had to place the call. The warm air that melted the few remaining banks of snow cured our problem. The mice have abandoned us for greener pastures, like Franklin Park up the street. Sometimes, the hardest problems are the ones that just go away.

Until the first frost.

Paul Zakrzewski, who has lately restored his dignity at the local hardware store, lives in Jamaica Plain.