

Mousetrap:

I'd actually just rather do this anonymously. I mean, you can call me Victor.

Ian Chillag:

Victor. Yeah.

Mousetrap:

We're all named Victor.

Mousetrap:

I had known about other mousetraps. I had heard grumblings of it and it seemed like a pretty easy gig.

Mousetrap:

You're just sort of hanging out. There's a lot of just sort of hurrying up and wait. It seemed like a fine gig.

Mousetrap:

I was actually one of the first in my family to be individually wrapped.

Ian Chillag:

Oh.

Mousetrap:

So I get it. Humans have warm houses. They're cozy. They don't want a little house mouse who's going to do 40 to 110 droppings and micro droppings per day. I got it. You don't want them. They maybe carry the plague. We don't know. But beyond that.

Ian Chillag:

Beyond the plague.

Mousetrap:

I don't understand why this is my battle to fight. I don't want to be used against the mouse. And that's all I'm saying.

Ian Chillag:

I'm sorry. Are you counting the droppings?

Mousetrap:

I don't have much else to do.

Ian Chillag:

Can I ask, and this feels like maybe a weird place to start. Have you killed a mouse in your life?

Mousetrap:

No, not yet.

Ian Chillag:

But you have been set. You are set.

Mousetrap:

I was set three and a half weeks ago.

Ian Chillag:

Okay.

Mousetrap:

Up until then, I was a really chill mousetrap, really relaxed. I looked forward to waking up every morning. What was the day going to bring? Was I going to be sitting on the shelf at the Home Depot for another few months, year? Or was I going to go somewhere? I finally got picked up. I was in the Home Depot in the Mission District, San Francisco, and brought to the common kitchen room of a hostel on Valencia on 16th, which is where I've been since then, just on the counter, right behind the toaster oven.

Ian Chillag:

Uh-huh (affirmative)

Mousetrap:

It's one of those kind of hostels.

Ian Chillag:

Yeah. And I imagine that you do encounter a lot of mice and other vermin in a hostel situation?

Mousetrap:

It's a very hostile situation.

Mousetrap:

So soon after I arrived, the lady who runs the hostel, Gudrin, she's Swiss-German. She pulled back my killer bar. And since then I have been on edge, like ready to snap.

Ian Chillag:

Literal and physical tension.

Mousetrap:

Like full catastrophe lifestyle. So of course, when Gudrin took me out of the package and I saw, "Oh, wow, I'm in a kitchen. This is going to be a lot of action here. I probably won't be here long. So I'm just going to take it all in." I saw her opening up the cupboard and I was just like, "Oh, she's going to bait me. This is it. This is when it happens. This is how this happens. This is when I get baited."

Mousetrap:

And there's always talk about what it's going to be. And I was hoping against hope that it wasn't peanut butter, because I'm ironically allergic to peanuts. And I saw her bring out a jar that looked like peanut butter, but then she opened it up and to my absolute pleasure, it was almond butter.

Ian Chillag:

Ah.

Mousetrap:

And this is one of those poorly wrapped gifts in life. I'm beginning to suspect that mice don't like almond butter. And the issue now, why there's so much urgency is it's only a matter of time before Gudrin also realizes that mice don't fancy almond butter.

Ian Chillag:

I don't think a lot of people like almond butter either.

Mousetrap:

No? They have so much of it at the hostel.

Ian Chillag:

I think actually almond butter may be the thing that keeps you safe.

Mousetrap:

Yeah.

Ian Chillag:

Yeah.

Mousetrap:

Isn't that crazy? How life works?

Mousetrap:

I think about the lowland hills of Eastern Pennsylvania where I'm from. I come from a very large family tree, over a 100 feet.

Ian Chillag:

Literally a tree.

Mousetrap:

Yes. I had about 35 years to mature, to be with my brethren and sisters. One day I knew I would be chopped down. And I got that. That was my purpose. I felt happy to have a purpose. Do you know how easy it is in life when you just have one thing you want to do, and you don't have to question anything, you don't have to learn anything, you don't have to ask anyone permission. There's just this thing you're doing. Simple.

Ian Chillag:

And for a tree, there are so many possibilities for what you could have been.

Mousetrap:

Some other particles, I know, some other planks, went to Ikea.

Ian Chillag:

Okay.

Mousetrap:

Some went for firewood, some went to end up as Jenga.

Ian Chillag:

To me that feels like that would be the dream.

Mousetrap:

Oh my God, yeah.

Ian Chillag:

Yeah.

Mousetrap:

People are laughing and playing. You're bringing joy. There's excitement. There's some downtime, and you never really get thrown out.

Ian Chillag:

Yeah. And in a way, I think, I don't know, but it seems like you would over and over at least get a little bit of the feeling of being reconstituted into a tree because the pieces would sort of make a trunk again.

Mousetrap:

Wow. You see, I never even thought about that. Yeah, that's all you're doing is really shining a light for me on the problem with my situation.

Ian Chillag:

So there's a phrase that humans say a lot, "Build a better mousetrap." And the whole phrase is, "Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat its path to your door." It's attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson. I don't think he ever said it. But I think about, when you hear that, when you hear that humans are walking around saying, "Build a better mousetrap," what's your first reaction to that?

Mousetrap:

I mean externally I'm, you really can't improve upon the mousetrap that I am. Now internally.

Ian Chillag:

Yeah.

Mousetrap:

I'm a mess. Oh my God. I'm codependent. I have anger issues. Have you ever read the book Codependent No More?

Ian Chillag:

I've not.

Mousetrap:

I haven't either, but I know that it's about codependency, and that you shouldn't do it anymore.

Ollie:

Hello?

Ian Chillag:

Hello. I'm calling for Ollie.

Ollie:

Hi, is that Ian?

Ian Chillag:

It is. Hello.

Ollie:

Hi. Nice to speak, Ian.

Ian Chillag:

Ollie, why don't you just introduce yourself for people listening?

Ollie:

So I'm Ollie Douglas and I'm a curator of the Museum of English Rural Life, which is part of the University of Redding, in England, in the UK

Ian Chillag:

Ollie, I'm calling you because you have something there at the museum called the perpetual mousetrap?

Ollie:

Yes.

Ian Chillag:

It came out in 1861. It is such a poetic title for a mousetrap. How did it get that name?

Ollie:

It's called a perpetual mousetrap because it has a sort of mechanism in the center of it, which means that when it traps one mouse, you don't then need to reset it or do anything for it to be set to trap another one.

Ian Chillag:

I see.

Ollie:

So the idea was that you would check it on a daily basis and you might have even caught two mice. So you check it and then release the mice in a humane way. That's the idea anyway.

Ian Chillag:

Just perpetually catching mice forever and ever.

Ollie:

Yeah. Yeah.

Ian Chillag:

Does it still work?

Ollie:

We know for fact that our perpetual mousetrap does still work because a couple of years ago now I was looking in the stores for a particular object and I was looking on the shelf next door to where most of our mousetraps are stored. So these are our reserve collections and we were actually closed at that point for the redevelopment of our displays and galleries and in the perpetual mousetrap, in our version of the perpetual mousetrap, I found a dead mouse. So actually this was a mouse that had broken into the museum somehow, found its way, rather unfortunately, into our historic collection of mousetraps, and we have over 100 of them, but it probably wasn't a particularly safe space for a mouse to be in.

Ian Chillag:

Really the worst place. Yeah.

Ollie:

Yeah.

Ian Chillag:

So yeah, this mousetrap just lying in wait for years and years before finally finding a victim.

Ollie:

Yeah. And actually the mouse is now on display in the mousetrap in the sort of welcome area of our museum in the very first case you see as you come in. It'll be here in perpetuity in the perpetual mousetrap.

Ian Chillag:

Okay. So, you have all these mousetraps at the museum. Are there other types of traps you have there?

Ollie:

We have a huge range of different traps, and actually on display in the museum, we have a good range of those, and those cover quite a wide range of animals that were traditionally trapped. And that might include hawk traps, rat traps, as well as mousetraps, a wide range of sort of snare traps and mole traps. And also perhaps most surprisingly we have man traps, which were until around 1827 were perfectly legal. These sort of giant jawed traps designed to catch poachers and severely maim them, if not potentially kill them.

Ian Chillag:

And they were just called man traps?

Ollie:

Yes. Yeah, man traps. And actually we have a sort of later version of that technology, a humane man trap. So it probably just broke the leg of the poacher rather than severed it.

Ian Chillag:

I feel like I should just ask, none of the man traps in your museum have caught any museum goers?

Ollie:

Thankfully not.

Ian Chillag:

Well, Victor, you're in this kitchen, and you've seen mice, I imagine.

Mousetrap:

I sure have. I don't know if there are a lot or it's just one all the time, but yeah. They're eating little crumbs. They're crawling a stuff. They're not trying to hurt anyone. They're minding their own business. What it's about is it's just the survival of the fittest. They're just the working class, I would say, of the animal kingdom.

Ian Chillag:

Are there things about mice that you've observed that maybe we humans wouldn't get to see?

Mousetrap:

I don't know how good your hearing is, but mice, when they're trying to attract a mate, actually sing a beautiful song in a pitch that humans can't hear, and this song is so rapturous, so delicate, so intoxicating. They're very romantic.

Ian Chillag:

I know that birds will sing songs when mating, but you're saying mice also sing songs?

Mousetrap:

Yeah. I don't know whose songs they are. I don't know if they wrote them themselves. I don't know if they're all singing the same song. It seems like they're all singing the same song.

Ian Chillag:

I just looked this up. There's a recording of these songs. Looks like they recorded it and dropped it down in pitch so that humans can perceive it. I'll play some of it.

Ian Chillag:

It's crazy to think about that there is this thing going on all the time, that we can't perceive, that literally there are love songs happening beneath our feet and in the walls of our apartments and we just were not aware of it.

Mousetrap:

I know. If you would've told me three months ago that I'd feel this way about mice, I would've called you a liar or an idiot. A good for nothing? A louse? A louse about? A laze about? A lazy? A louse? A lice? I would've called you a name about it. But now I hear that saying, and it broke me out. I was bred to be a killer. I'm a killing machine. But something about me, my circumstance, what I'm realizing now that I'm awake, my eyes are open to it, mice are really red.

Ian Chillag:

I guess the big question is what do you do, when the thing you were made to do, is the last thing you want to do.

Mousetrap:

Yeah, man. Why do we have to kill mice? Why do I have to kill mice? Why can't I instead be a utensil that you use to scrape gum off of the bottom of your shoe? Maybe I'm a paperweight? Maybe you can give me the kids to play with if you put some packaging tape, enough packaging tape, to make the killer bar softer, so it won't hurt their little fingers so much?

Ian Chillag:

I don't think that's a good idea.

Mousetrap:

There's a lot of things I could be, and let's just ask that question.

Mousetrap:

You could maybe use me to catch, oh, catch elves at Christmas, just set me up and put me on the mantle and like, "Oh, here's an elf in the house." So you could do that. You could put some perfume on me and hang me on your rear view mirror as a scent for your car, if you're a smoker. A metronome for a song that's only one note long. Oh my God, if you don't have a belt, you could just take me and clamp my kill bar onto your pants, cinch them.

Ian Chillag:

Kind of cinch, yeah.

Mousetrap:

Yeah, kind of cinch them and do that, and then you don't even have to do a belt, which is, I think, for where a lot of people would be fashion forward and then also just like utilitarian. And I could do the talking circuit, like lectures. I could be a wall hanging. I could be a tiny cheese plate for guests. You could paint me and put me on the windowsill at a hospital to cheer people up. Why not a Jenga tower of mousetraps? You could probably buy enough mousetraps to make a Jenga game, and then there's like a third dimension to it, which is like, "Oh, also like when you move the thing, don't just not let the tower fall over, but also don't get snapped."

Ian Chillag:

It adds some stakes to the game.

Mousetrap:

Oh.

Mousetrap:

You mentioned that Emerson quote earlier. There's actually a quote of his that I use as a map. "To be yourself in a world that's constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment."

Ian Chillag:

Hmm.

Mousetrap:

Sounds so cheesy when I say it. It didn't sound so earnest in my head, but you know what I mean?

Ian Chillag:

This is Everything Is Alive. The show is produced by Jennifer Mills and me, Ian Chillag This taping was directed by MacKenzie Chung Fegan. Thanks as always to Emily Spivack. The anonymous mousetrap was played by Mel Shimkovitz. Mel is an artist working in the medium of television. She's a writer and an actor. She is a generally unclassifiable wonderful person. Special thanks to Ollie Douglas of the Museum of English Rural Life for talking to us about the ancient, but apparently still functional, perpetual mousetrap, and also man traps. And we should say, we learned about the mating songs of mice from a team at Duke University, which discovered and recorded them.

Ian Chillag:

Most of this episode was recorded at Studio 44 in Brooklyn, New York. Music in this episode from Thomas Tallis, Chad Crouch, and Blue Dot Sessions. Everything's Alive is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. Julie Shapiro, Vice President of Editorial and Audrey Mardavich, Senior Director of Content, both of whom practice the catch and release method of producing. You can get in touch with us any number of ways at everything'salive.com. We'll see you soon.