

'Still Life of Dead Birds and a Mouse',
Jean Baptiste Oudry (1712).



The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage

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A sausage, a bird, and a mouse set up house.
No, really! This is how the story goes: every day,
the mouse draws water from the well,
the bird flies firewood in from the forest,
and the sausage, obviously, is in charge of the cooking,
popping into the water pot over the fire,
snoozing, seeping, and stirring flavour in.
(The mouse does the dishes and the sweeping too.
Sausages usually think they're doing half the housework
when really it's more like a third.)
In any case, the Grimms report the trio lived this way
for a long time, in comfort and prosperity.

That would have been that, but one day the bird
meets another bird from his fraternity flock
and brags about this sweet setup. He should have known
Other-Bird is not the type who can just be happy
for his friend's steamy ménage.
'Sly' he sneers, 'So, how did they con you
into taking on the worst job? I mean,
they don't even have to leave home, while here you are,
risking life and wing in a wood full of foxes' (like a chump, it's implied).
Our bird doesn't let on, but inside he fumes.
Privately he resolves to make some changes.

'All right, you layabouts,' the bird announces that night,
'Did you think I'd be your fool forever? We try something new.
Give me one of these nice, safe, easy jobs around the house
and one of you can fetch the firewood. I'm done.'

What he doesn't know
Is that the sausage harbours a secret desire to see the world!
'Ooh,' he squeals, and volunteers to venture into the woods.
The bird says, well, then, *he* will take over well duties,
leaving the mouse to manage the cooking.
(Realistically, she is still going to have to do the tidying up, too.)
'The kitchen is too hot' she protests, 'you forget my fur coat'
but in vain; the boys butter her up until she gives in,
and that's that.

The next morning the sausage heads for the forest,
carrying a walking-stick
and wearing the bird's sun hat (so he won't brown).
His little bit of heart gristle is bursting with joy.
The mouse and the bird wait for him to return.
And wait. And wait.
No sausage. No wood. No fire. No dinner.
The mouse dusts the clock face.
The bird broods. They can't look each other in the eye.
When they can stand it no longer,
the bird flies out to search.

He does not find the sausage, but he does find a dog
licking its chops, ever so pleased with itself.
Is that the sunhat, abandoned by the side of the road!?
Beside himself with rage, the bird demands
that the dog justify this pitiless murder.
'He was carrying forged papers,' the dog replies coolly,
'and as you well know the penalty for sausages
wandering about without proper identification
is death. By devouring'
And that's that.

Now what's supposed to happen next is this.
Sorrowfully, the bird returns home
and he and the mouse shed a tear together for their lost friend
before deciding to get on with life. The bird sets the table
while the mouse, not one to backwards cast her eye,

climbs into the bubbling pot just as the sausage used to do – and dies horribly, her fur and skin scalded straight off. Confounded by her disappearance, unable to solve this locked-room mystery, the bird sets the house on fire while searching for her and drowns down the well.

*The moral: know your place.
They had a good life. But oh no!
They thought they had to try something new!
No wonder they came to grief.*

Is that that?
Perhaps there's no saving a sausage
foolish enough to set out into the world with false papers.
But mouse and bird might have learned something from him.
Let us say instead that they weep together, but they honour their friend,
knowing he perished doing what he had always longed to do.
Would that they, too, were so brave.
'This house won't be the same without him,' mourns the bird,
and the mouse agrees; they can't stay here anymore.
'The truth is,' the mouse says, 'the truth is,
I've always wanted to fly.
Will you take me?'

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