

MOUSE

This one is not like the well-structured sermon. To start by telling you in general what it is I'm about to tell you more specifically just wouldn't work. This is a tale of digression, coincidence, transference, deconstruction and random connection that is not easily summarized. Then to tell you directly and precisely what it is I want to say is impossible because the story is too brutal and painful to be written in short clear sentences and simple words. And finally it is most unlikely that I would dare to conclude with any precise synopsis of what has just been said, because, frankly, once we're done none will want - not you, not I - a retelling in whole or in part. Still all in all, it's a familiar and enjoyable tale of a kind, though one, I'm sure, you've never heard before and may very well hate.

Crimes and Misdemeanors is good Woody Allen. It's not only serious about morality, guilt, God, fate, and all that heavy stuff, but it's also funny. Woody plays Woody, in an intense subplot, the nerd we all love, who loses at everything but keeps his sense of humour. All around him are the rich and powerful, unworthy but lucky, and unpunished for their copious sins. The fact they are unpunished whether the very notion of sin is a myth. This film is heavy! Theologians will hold seminars. But Woody keeps us laughing.

The central character in the film is an ophthalmologist, rich, handsome, successful, with a loving family and an adoring hospital staff. But our hero is more, or less, than he seems depending on your point of view. He has a major affair going with an airline stewardess. The mistress is so enamoured that she wants him break off with his little housewife and make their torrid affair official and permanent just as he, she alleges, has promised. He, needless to say, has a different recollection of the nuances of their pillow talk. After all a side bet is only a side bet.

The tart won't listen to reason. She makes more and more reckless threats and even attempts to have a little heart to heart with her rival which the good doctor accidentally intercepts. She even goes so far as to propose to share with world the mystical wonders of the doctor's creative accounting of hospital trust funds.

All the while Woody makes jokes about his miniature penis.

Eventually our protagonist is forced to consider the suggestion of his greaseball brother in whom he foolishly confides. The brother proposes that the tart be toasted by out-of-town help.

The doctor agonizes about this alternative. The option, confessing to his wife, is too risky and certainly too painful. But his repeated efforts to break off with the stewardess are unsuccessful. She has talents the wife lacks.

In the mean time Woody strikes out with seven girls in one afternoon, all Jewish.

The tart comes unhinged in a torrent of tears. The doctor seems - to make every effort to be a gentleman - he offers her money to get lost. The portait of the doctor's dilemma conforms rigorously to the moral precept of our age - that, generally speaking, one ought not to kill the mistress if apprehension is a serious possible.

In reality the wife is not threat. She is a greater moral coward than he, with a need for a proper spouse even greater than his. She is not a woman of principle, or a secret feminist yearning for freedom. Most bluntly, she has nothing rich cooking on the back burner and consequently could not possibly afford to turn him in.

Eventually, as her hysteria becomes more and more menacing he gives in to his seedy brother's approach as the only way to end his torment. And they arrange to ice the broad. The doctor certainly regrets, no abhors, the ugly instructions so given. But there was for him no other way. A tough call, but he didn't become chief of ophthamology by dithering. Weigh the options, and act decisively, grandad always said.

Would that were the end. Unfortunately for us that pain of prevarication proves but a piffle to the doctor compared to the anguish and guilt after the deed is done. The doctor now mopes around for a good third of the movie, remembering the moral rectitude and faith of his father and family, having hot flashes of self-loathing, disgust, bad temper, and almost, almost confessing everything to his cunningly innocent wife.

Fortunately for us about this time Woody loses his best girl to a good-looking, smooth-talking, patronizing T.V. producers who's very funny.

Stricten thus by fear and conscience the doctor visits the tart's apartment to see the body. Woe, woe, and guilt. Although he has the presense of mind to meticulously remove all his personal belongings and every item that might link him to the deceased.

Of course it was wrong to do in the mistress. Even though she was being an unreasonable shithead, was obviously emotionally unhinged with nothing to live for, given to flights of hopeless romantic fantacy and dillusion, not to mention her multiple substance abuse, even thus thou shalt not kill. Not even in the face of her vicious threats and emotional blackmail - thou shalt not kill. Clearly there would be other fish in the sea for this promiscuous airhead, though perhaps not quite so rich and deeply meaninful as the handsome but aging ophthamologist. In the calculus of the greatest good what is her loss, so-called, compared to the wreckage of a thirty year marriage, a happy family, a career, a whole world of good deeds and community esteem? Murder her? An understandable temptation, a judgement call may-be, but, all things considered, nevertheless, and in the last analysis, it was wrong to kill the mistress. Alright. Yes, he should have confessed to the wife, alright, alright!

Can we at least say on behalf of the doctor that his guilt demonstrates that he eventually did come to the right conclusion? Or does it indicate only an irrelevant discomfort after the fact? Therein hangs an ethics seminar. From the point of view of the

tart, however this question is of relatively little interest.

Then Woody spills punch all over a beautiful woman at a wedding and loses his mother and family to robbers and sewer rats in an hilarious series pratfalls..

As solace for his guilt and anguish the doctor takes his whole family on a grand trip to Europe, spends pots of money, and returns to America feeling much better, thank you very much. That's why America is such a great country.

And that, more or less, is the movie, condensing the nerd/mench subplot which contextualized this grim morality play as a rude interruption of a very funny monologue of sexual anxiety. Remember that awful movie, Interiors? Woody told it straight, no jokes. He never made that mistake again.

The serious part of this movie was interesting and suspenseful at first - would the big dick doctor really "do it"? But then it is agonizing as the wretch moans about his guilty conscience after the deed was done. He did what he ought not, bad enough, but then whined enough to make a deaf shrink puke. I was more offended by his whining than by his sinning. I left the theatre contemptuous of the spineless whimp - it cost him a family plan grand tour to atone for his guilt when a confession to his wife would have been much cheaper. I was more offended by the waste of money. But overall the pain was tolerable because Woody was Woody.

So much for death and conscience in the modern world.

The next night I was wakened from a light sleep by the squeals of a mouse caught but evidently not killed in one of my kitchen death traps. Eventually silence returned, and I returned unperturbed to my slumber.

In the morning the great hunter went down stairs to check the traplines. And in the kitchen on the stove I observed with some moral panic the cause of the noisy anguish of the night. Poor mousey was caught by the tail only. He had - I have no reason to presume "he" except the sexist assumption that only men steal and get caught -- dragged the trap across the stove and tried to crawl down through the coil of the burner to the interior where, no doubt, six or seven thousand of his nearest and dearest family and friends were waiting for word of free food. But he got stuck, because the mousetrap would not slide so smoothly into the stove as the lithe body of the maurading sneak thief.

You might say he got stuck because he was stupid and desparate, but that would not be fair. Where would you run to hide if the refridgerator door snapped shut on the back of your pant leg in the middle of the night?

Not only stuck, but suspended upside-down. The trap was overturned on the burner, and the furry recidivist (again I presume but do you doubt it) was dangling nose-down in the Kenmore. And not just hanging limp, dead and easy to pull out, but live and kicking with an emphatic though irregular rhythm. When I approached he started squealing hysterically again. He was not taking this well. My presbyterian-canadian weltanschauung requires that having made a fool of yourself and mortally wounded one goes quietly, modestly and above all without a fuss. This mouse was clearly not

one of us.

Anyone who has seen a cowboy movie, or visited a farm or even take a sick cat to the vet, knows what comes next. When your best horse or pussy falls painfully wounded you put him out of his misery with your trusty sixshooter, cry a short manly cry, offstage, and get on with the rustlin', or buy a smaller cuter one as the case may be.

Did I get on with the necessary tasks? Sorry things are so obvious in this story.

My first instinct was to fish him out of the Kenmore and carry him and the trap gently to the wilds of the raspberries and the dahlia's wherein I would release him into a natural nirvana where he more truly belonged and would flourish - at least so I thought in my charitable reverie. But this mouse - need I say it, like the mistress - was most unreasonable. He clung stubbornly to the underside of the burner, in a fit of romantic fantasy that somehow his life might go on a before. He was clearly unstable, unhinged and disillusioned. If he had spent any time in a presbyterian church he had learned nothing.

Notwithstanding his bad manners I did try to get him out of the burner. For him it should have been a time of high drama, a last minute reprieve, a call from the governor, a shaft of light suddenly shining in the dark heart of a killer. For those fleeting few moments I truly hoped that for him pure human goodness would be seen as greater than death.

But it was not to be. He clung stubbornly to the underside of the burner! Hang loose, I said. But he could not. The very profound question - why not - will never be answered. He, not I, condemned himself.

A man's gotta do...to be sure...but, in truth I was reluctant even then, confronted as I was with the indelicate task of killing with my own hands, even a death so common place and evidently necessary. Let me be clear that this was not something so serious as anguish, or dread, or self-loathing. Just a little hesitation, a further reflection upon options. It never crossed my mind to loosen the trap and let him escape into my stove, generosity is after all bounded by self-interest, just a re-evaluation of the dahlia option. It was one of those what-to-do moments in life, It never crossed my mind at that stage that I might fail as a killer.

Then by chance, I happened on a satisfactory interim arrangement....I'd let him hang a bit as is, a deterrent to his kind ... while I went to the Y for my morning constitutional. Maybe in my absense he'd make a get away, and put me out of my agony. My agony! No, that is not correct, it was not agony. But I will leave the word, so future biographers will have something to ponder, But it was not "agony". That was a slip.

And I did. But in the interval he didn't.

When I returned I tried to ignore him as I chewed my oat bran and high pulp enriched fruit juice. But he squealed a lot. He squealed too much for his own good frankly, carrying on while I read, or tried to read, the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's National Newspaper. It was only then that it became obvious and morally simple what I had to do. Very bad timing by the mouse. I would fry him.

I finished my toast and approached my Kenmore. Finally there was a reverend silence. I sighed with relief. He knew his time was near and finally, finally, he found some small semblance of dignity I hoped.

I went for the right rear dial with the lightening speed for which I was justly famous. But suddenly he squealed again, even more loudly, in total terror. And I froze. Visions flashed before me. There but for the grace of God, I thought.

And it was that moment, I realize in retrospect and notwithstanding subsequent events, when I failed as a killer.

I rushed to the bathroom. I brushed my teeth and gums at length and with great vigour wondering all the while what good had been all my professional training for decisive action in crisis, fifteen years at the bar, the toiliing in the torts texts on the nuances of retribution, all my work on the principles of sentencing, centuries of knowledge distilled. And here was I, irresolute and squeamish about the administration of an obviously just reward to flea-bitten sneak thief.

Finally, my incisors properly polished, I returned from the bathroom, put on my big black snow boots which helped a lot, marched to the kitchen and I did it. I just did it.

Medium high, right rear. I fried the fucker.

Then I went upstairs to count my undershirts and socks. While I was counting he started to smoke. Let me tell you, this was a very satisfying smell for a guy doesn't even inhale a joint.

I had seventeen shirts, five torn, and twenty-two and a half pair.

When I returned to the kitchen however, it was not a satisfying sight, blackened mouse clinging, now encrusted upon, the underside of right rear, a crispy critter too hot handle. The thought of scrapping him off filled me with disgust. The lingering aroma of burnt mouse flesh did not remind me cornish hens in oyster sause. I fled from my home, my home, and took my broken spirit to the more regulated and managable slaughter house of my law office.

Now all this is just frivolous preamble to the weighty matter which I would now but whisper briefly.

A few days before I had read about some high-rollin, big time, macho Texas contingency lawyers who lived by the slogan "we eat what we kill". The phrase had stuck, and around it chapter seven of my professional identity crisis was building. I was trying to persuaded myself that I was a tiny perfect Canadian miniature of the tall Texans, living by my wits, a self-appointed sheriff, a hired gun, an avenger of the powerless, a noble tribune of the people, a self-financing ombudsman, living on the edge, paid to win or starve in the street. I had become, I was telling myself, a ruthless killer, a conscienceless crusader for justice without mercy, a vengence machine without a soul, a paid instrumentality of the disenchanted, disengaged, disconnected, a Robocop of the Motions Courts.

But now, it seemed, I was afraid to kill a mouse. Worse, I was overwhelmingly and disablingsly guilty that I had killed. Worse still, I was parallized by the prospect of removing the corpse.

When my time came would that I could find a more resolute executioner than poor mouse. And my time was apparently neigh.

Far from being a reassurance of my essential humanity the revelation of this uncontrollable compassion plunged me deeper into professional despair. I was a man without substance, an image, a has been, a killer who had lost his nerve. Once the word got out I would surely perish. Did Matt Dillon ever suffer so much?

My secretary is very shrewd. She could tell. I caught her looking at me sideways. How much notice would she give? I was finished.

I languished all day. I could account for every wasted minute, such is the miracle of computerized docketing. But I won't bore you, like the movie. So scarred was I by this irresolution that I closed my books that afternoon and wandered the streets till dark in total fear of returning to my own home and the charred body of my little friend.

But eventually I did return home that night largely because it was too cold to sleep in the park. I came filled with dread. But, praise the lord and lucky timing, it was the one day a month when my humble home is tended by a cleaning lady, bless her mouse-removing soul and fingers, and generous amounts of ozone destroying pine mist aerosol air freshener. My monthly extravagance made me feel much better, thank you very much. That's why Canada is such a grand country.

The next day I cheerfully returned to the office and evicted three widows before lunch, then launched a \$300,000 defamation action against a crippled construction worker who had the temerity to allege to his priest that his working conditions were unsafe.

Nobody has ever learned of my prevarication or my guilt. Presented thus, as a joke, you, dear reader, will forget this in a flash, and in truth you have learned nothing. The pangs of conscience are tedious and painful unless served with mirth. To look seriously at our wanton carnage is the worst sin, it seems boring. The anguish of the daily slaughter can never be served raw.

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