

THE LABOUR OF MOLES

By Mark Spann

He's thinking too much. It happens most nights, when the darkness and the silence wedge themselves into the spaces between experiences, making space for a train of thought. Tonight, the darkness of the living room is like chalkboard paint, and the silence scribbles its dusty, squeaking doubts and self-recriminations and regrets across the empty space before him.

On most nights, unable to sleep, he remains downstairs long after his wife and daughter have gone to bed. There are locks to check and wastebaskets to empty, random nagging thoughts on which to obsess, actions and words to reconsider and question, problems to solve. Tonight, as he runs his stubby fingers through his thinning salt-and-pepper hair, he wishes he could have thin fingers and thick hair instead. And he considers the moles.

There are moles in the front yard and he can't get rid of them. They avoid the traps and ignore the poison, and apparently they have learned to swim because he has flooded their tunnels several times without success. From the porch the yard still looks green and healthy, but wherever the moles have tunneled, the roots are gone. When he walks around the yard, the ground settles where the surface has been undermined. Sometimes he thinks he will have to surrender the lawn altogether.

He stands at the bay window in the living room, an ashtray cradled in one hand like a chin paten. If I am still, he thinks, very still, I will hear them digging. He slows his breathing, slows it and softens it until the movement of air is so gradual, so subtle that not one hair on a mole's pelt would be disturbed, even if he held it right up to his nostrils. So slow, so gradual. The Buddha himself would credit such self-control.

Darkness settles down around him like a fine dust, windswept tailings from the labour of moles carried aloft on the currents of his thoughts, infiltrating the smallest of spaces—the folds of his elbows, the new, fine wrinkles that have etched themselves into the skin between his eye sockets and his temples, the tufts of fine hair just along the upper rims of his auricles—until there is only the warm orange heat of his cigarette to stir it.

While in college he'd worked the night shift at UPS. It was a hard, sweaty job, loading trucks, but he found that he loved the night. Especially in late fall, with the cold, clear night sky and the chilly air. Late-night talk radio reminded him that he was not alone—and yet, there was something about being up overnight. As a boy he thought that he had secret knowledge somehow. Of what, he didn't know. As a man, though he knew that all across the country there were millions of people awake at that moment, he still found easy, and comforting, to slip into that reverie, that fiction of solitude.

“The labour of moles” —he liked the phrase. He'd learned that only today, that a group of moles is called a *labour*. At least, that's what was written in the Wikipedia article he'd found as he searched for advice on how to rid his yard of the pests. Odd for a couple of reasons, he thinks. First, the mole is a solitary creature, prone to socializing only for mating purposes. He snorts softly at that thought, finds it oddly comforting. With his poor eyesight, his propensity for

solitude, wasn't he somewhat mole-like? He glances down at his hands, examines the spaces between his fingers.

Second, was it meant to be *labour*, in the British way, with that British spelling, like the Labour Party? Who runs that party now, anyway? He lost track after Tony Blair left office, which isn't surprising to him since he lives in a Midwestern suburb, not the Midlands. And again, as solitary animals the moles likely wouldn't belong to a Labour party.

Or is it *labour* in the sense of the Labours of Hercules, whose struggles led to immortality? Moles certainly seem to be immortal, he thinks. Or maybe they reincarnate—it has seemed lately that way, as each dead mole he discovers in his trap is almost immediately replaced.

Or should it have been the American spelling—*labor*? He considers the alternatives, decides he prefers the British spelling as more substantial somehow, more befitting the cunning of his adversaries. His struggle with them has indeed become a *labour*.

He draws a sudden, deep breath, and the orange embers at the end of his cigarette flare and recede. Smoke curls tightly for an instant, then jets out in front of him on the eddies of his exhalations.

It doesn't take long for him to make his circuit through the house, to check the locks downstairs and turn out the porch lights. His routine seldom varies; he's a creature of habit, as valuable a trait in a mechanical engineer as in a night watchman, which he sometimes imagines himself to be: his family's private, live-in night watchman. His wife, Allison, complains that he engineers too-big solutions to the smallest problems, making the solution more complex than the problem itself, and he believes that she is probably right. At least, he thinks, I don't have outlines of my tools drawn on the pegboard behind the workbench.

He takes comfort in that thought. However, he does like to shelve the canned goods in the pantry by type of food—peas with peas, corn with corn, soups grouped by variety. And the toilet seats in every bathroom must be down at all times. That is critical, for reasons he can't even explain. On his rounds through the house each night he checks them, upstairs, down, and the master bedroom, where Allison snores gently. She never puts the lid down, and he always needs to know that the lid is down. That's just the way it is.

His 8-year-old daughter, Kelly, also sleeps upstairs. Her room is his final checkpoint. She stirs and mumbles when he brushes aside her dishwasher blonde bangs and kisses her forehead, as though she knows he's there. Then he shuffles back downstairs again, checking that the dishwasher is on, the light in the garage is out, and the toilet seat is down. He finds the remote for the television and flicks the set on briefly but finds nothing worth watching. Besides, it will only make the insomnia worse. He puts the remote on top of the television every night so that the first person to turn it on the next day will have to walk at least from the couch to the television and back.

He feeds the fish and let the cats out if they want to get out or in if they want to get in, and then he settles into his usual post, an old gravy-brown Naugahyde recliner that belonged to his father. Unable to sleep, he sits, and listens, and watches, and thinks.

Entropy, isn't it? The gradual decline into disorder? That's what's really happening, he thinks—the gradual decline into disorder. The moles are just the agents of change, perhaps. Why bear enmity toward them just because they are behaving naturally?

He wonders if entropy is as inevitable in relationships as it is in the physical world. Will he recognize that gradual decline? Should he even worry about it?

It's early September. For a few weeks they will be able to do without the furnace and the air conditioner, leaving the windows open most every night. This is his favorite time of year, even with the extra yard work it brings. He clings to the old ways, eschewing mulching mowers and power leaf blowers, unlike most of his neighbors. He will rake the leaves into huge piles, let Kelly jump and tumble around in them for a while, and then burn them in an old metal burn barrel, his most prized bequest from his grandfather.

The maple trees in front of the house, if he could see them, are a brilliant orange-yellow. In the breezy light of the past afternoon they flickered like the amber lights of construction hazard barricades. He closes his eyes and can see them again. He thinks about all the different shades of yellow—the greenish yellow of bananas, the brown yellow of manila envelopes. The blue yellow of a three-day-old bruise.

The air smells of rain. Out on the state road a truck (probably a diesel pickup, judging by the low, throaty rattle of the muffler) downshifts as it rounds the tight curve that borders the property.

He thinks about his parents and what he thought of them when he was the age that Kelly will be in seven or eight years. This is not a comforting thought; but perhaps, because he and Allison have been much better parents than were his parents, Kelly will be a happier, less moody and somber teenager than he was.

He considers the foolishness of those thoughts.

For several weeks there have been rumors of downsizing at the electrical utility at which he works. He's been there for almost 20 years, since graduating from engineering school, and he's worried. Though sometimes he thinks it would be a relief to be let go. Then he would be forced to make a change, to try something different, though he has no idea of what that different thing would be. He could be like the moles he flushes from their tunnels, to move on to greener pastures, so to speak. He thinks this is both an irresponsible and seductive train of thought.

He thinks about Allison sleeping upstairs, still slender and optimistic. Allison has taken much better care of herself than he has, and still passes for 30 sometimes, though they are both a good ten years past that. He is 43 and looks it—graying and soft. Yesterday while shaving he realized that his earlobes, now a bit bulbous at the tips, are no longer his but rather his grandmother's.

He wonders if he would marry Allison again, given the chance to go back—or more seriously, whether she would marry him. What was it that attracted them each to the other, so many years ago? This is a test, he thinks, and he cannot answer the question. It is something he used to know but has forgotten.

He thinks he has been a bad husband in this regard.

The carpeting in the living room, if he could see it, is a royal blue Berber weave that he installed himself the week before. It really isn't right for the house, and he has no idea now why he thought it would work, though at the time he insisted on the color. Even in the faint light from Kelly's aquarium he can see how the carpet clashes with the furniture. Allison said that the old, creamy color carpet was just fine, and she was right.

Two things he has found about moles particularly fascinate him. First, they can reuse the oxygen they inhale when above ground. Thus they can tolerate higher carbon dioxide levels, which is why they can survive underground. He imagines a mole, like a tiny blue whale, breaching the surface of his lawn, gulping air, and splashing back down into his burrow, shards of grass and bits of soil splaying in his wake.

Second, they don't taste good, according to a few people who have tried them. He realizes that, amid his malicious and deeply violent thoughts about moles, it has never occurred to him to eat one.

He rubs his feet back and forth over the rough fibers of the royal blue Berber until there are little numb spots on his heels and the balls of his feet. He thinks that he won't tell Allison how he really feels about the carpet now.

Through the living room window, in the faint glow of moonlight, he watches the porch swing shudder and then gently sway as it is rustled by the push of wind in advance of an approaching cold front. There is a noise somewhere. He sits quietly to hear it again, to be certain that it is real.

A door opens and closes. A light comes on, and then another door closes. It's Kelly, up to use the bathroom. She is usually so sleepy that she doesn't remember these trips. This is a routine that Kelly repeats several times a week now. Although he's given her no formal training, he thinks Kelly may have the makings of an apprentice watchman. He tries to be still, but she knows he is at his regular post in the old chair. She likely spotted the glowing tip of his cigarette. She pads down the carpeted stairway and he prepares for the nonsmoking lecture she will give him.

He thinks that he will not encourage her to follow in this vocation.

"Hi Daddy," she whispers. There is no lecture this time.

"Hi, sugar. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she says, snuggling against his shoulder. Suddenly she is so small again that he can swing her easily onto his lap.

"Why are you up?"

"I forgot to check my fish." Her hand strokes his stubbled cheek. "I checked to make sure the closet light was off, like you always do. Then I had to go to the bathroom."

"Oh."

"And then I smelled you down here."

"You smelled me?"

“Your stinky cigarette.” He is glad the lecture is happening after all. He enjoys her concern for his welfare. “I thought you were going to quit, Daddy.”

“I am.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

He thinks sometimes—not often, but sometimes—of trying harder to break this habit, seeking medical help or counseling, something. It’s lonely, sitting there in the dark while everyone else, except for the moles, is asleep. Are any of his neighbors sitting in the dark as well, smoking and thinking too much? Perhaps they have secret knowledge that he will never have, knowledge that enables them to accept things like a churned-up, chewed-up lawn and still sleep at night.

Kelly lays her head against his chest and sits with him until her breaths are so slow and so deep that he assumes he is asleep. She starts talking again when he moves to get up from the chair and takes her up to bed.

“Why do you stay up so late?” she asks him.

“Sometimes I can’t sleep.”

“Maybe you think too much. That’s what mom says when I can’t fall asleep. She says I am thinking too much, that I need to let my thoughts be like leaves and just blow around in my head instead of trying to grab and hold onto them. She says you worry too much.”

“I think she’s right,” he says. “And how do you know that I stay up late?”

“I’m sneaky,” she whispers with some pride. “Sometimes I come down the steps almost all the way to look at you, and you don’t even know.”

“Really? Well, you little sneak, I’m OK. And we both need to get to bed.”

She slips off his lap but at the last moment he gently lifts her back to him. When she was younger he would sit in this chair and hold her against himself when he couldn’t sleep. Soon the rhythm of her breathing and the comfortable, compact weight of her small body would make him drowsy.

“You can stay for a few minutes,” he says quietly.

She snuggles in again and yawns. “What are you thinking about?” she whispers.

He thinks—he has no idea. He is thinking about everything that has happened, and should have happened, and won’t happen. He is thinking about old aspirations and ugly carpets. He is thinking about entropy, about the undermining of beautiful things, about the coffee can full of rusty nails and stripped screws and mismatched nuts and bolts that he keeps on his workbench, moving them from house to house even though they aren’t any use to him anymore and haven’t been for a long time.

“Oh, the moles,” he tells her. “I’m thinking about the moles. I haven’t been able to kill them.”

This is the wrong thing to say. Kelly sits up with a child’s instinctive urge to protect small defenseless animals.

“Why do you have to kill them? Why can’t you just wait until they leave?”

“If I don’t get rid of the moles now, they’ll all of the grass.”

“So, if there is no grass, would they leave then?”

“I don’t know, Kelly,” he replies. But he does know. It is not the grass the moles want: it is not the beautiful green landscape, the ordered yard, the predictable progression of the days that he has worked so hard to cultivate. All of that will remain intact, for a while at least, and no one will see how thin and fragile is the ordered surface. The moles labor much deeper: it is what works beneath the surface that the moles will kill, the worms that coil and wriggle and aerate the soil to keep it healthy. He knows this but considers it cruel somehow to tell her.

“I don’t know,” he whispers.

“Oh.” She lays her head back on his chest and settles in again. He feels the slow pushing and release of pressure on his chest as she breathes.

“Dad,” Kelly whispers. “Why can’t you just plant new grass?”

He starts to answer her. “Because,” he says, but he can think of nothing to say after “because.” And she has already fallen asleep.

Mark Spann is an elementary school principal and cigar box ukulele builder in the beautiful wine country of mid-eastern Missouri.