

The Shrew

Instead of trying to revive the sparse lawn struggling to grow under a 75' umbrella pine in back of our house, I decided to sow clover. I had heard it was good for the soil and would bring in the bees. I spread organic soil on top of the tired grass and threw a lot of clover seed on it before the fall rains. It sprouted after a week and is now 10" high accented with vine-like sprouts reaching toward the mighty pine.

But on this afternoon, there seemed to be an audible, almost angry buzzing around my dark green clover.

I walked out the back door of my downstairs studio and plucked a couple of clover flowers then popped them in my mouth. The seeds I planted seemed to grow both white and soft purple flowers. They don't taste like much until you get to the dense part near the stem and then they're sweet.

I was feeling self-satisfied and almost a little happy as I chewed. I slipped off my flip-flops and dared my feet to go bare. The cool three-leaf blades slipped under and between my toes. I tiptoed toward the fence to smell the jasmine laced on the wire. The azaleas below were noticeably greener since I started feeding them with left over coffee and brewed grounds.

Nature seemed responsive and kind to me until I saw the cyclone of buzzing a few yards away. Yellow jackets and flies were competing there and dive-bombing a small black shape. As I approached it, the buzzing got more aggressive so I backed off and squatted low to take a look.

At first I thought they were after a mouse but I had never seen black mice. Whatever it was lay very still on top of a dry heart-shaped ivy leaf. The stem curled around and above it. I quickly looked away and wanted to walk away. Then I turned around instead and did my best to shoo away the yellow jackets and flies.

I carefully lifted the stiff ivy leaf so I could see this tiny animal eye to eye. But instead I saw it didn't have eyes or even ears for that matter. Its head was like an extension of its full body and it ended with an almost transparent pink snout that came to a soft point. It had a tail like a mouse, pinkish as well. Its front paws were like paddles with claws that angled up and out from its pudgy body. The black fur appeared soft and undamaged.

"Awww," I uttered involuntarily. And then the illustrations of Beatrix Potter came to me. This critter looked like one of her paintings because it was so cute and lovable. I put it down but I couldn't just leave it there to be devoured even though I knew that would also be responsive nature.

I recalled some satin and velvet scraps I kept in my studio, leftovers from a crazy quilt I made years ago. I went in and trimmed a piece of chartreuse satin first but the color didn't feel right. So I cut a piece of coral silk instead. I had been saving it for who knows what. This sunset color seemed sympathetic and warm next to the creature's soft black form.

I got my trowel, went back outside, dug a small plot off the side of the clover then slid the trowel under the ivy leaf, mole and all. They had become one.

I lay it on the coral satin, wrapped it then secured it with the green strips. With my hands I set it on the earth. I covered it with burnt-umber soil and decomposing pine needles. I found a flat stone to place on the small grave then I plucked two clover flowers, one purple, one white and crossed them on top the stone.

The next day I told a friend what happened. He's a tracker and naturalist.

"Was it black?"

"Yeah, so I didn't think it was a mouse."

"Was it the size of a mouse?"

"Uh huh, so I guess it was a baby mole cause it didn't have any eyes and it had a mole-like nose"

"Well, if it's what I think it was, their eyes are covered with skin and their ears have no outside appendages."

"How do you know all this?"

"I saw one years ago while tracking, also dead. I was so taken with it I had to find out more. They're a type of shrew and they don't get any bigger. The shrew family got that name because they were thought to be aggressive and venomous. Guess you could see they're no such thing. Sounds like you had the privilege of encountering a shrew mole."

So clover brings forth flowers and those call in the bees. Rich soil beckons earthworms and grubs. Shrew moles find their way under fences, over ivy and into the earth. When their time comes, they call in yellow jackets, flies and this one called in me. Today the bees are busy again and the clover is dappled with sunlight.

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