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MOUSE

ONE DAY I CAUGHT MY FATHER brushing his teeth with a mouse. He pushed the soft white fur of its underbelly across his gums, his hand gripping the tail as a handle. Of course I ran to tell my mother.

Father! She said. Do not brush your teeth with a mouse!

He wanted to stop—you could see it in his eyes—but he kept on brushing, lathering his teeth with cinnamon-flavored paste.

Father! Put that mouse down! My mother advanced, flapping her apron at him.

Now he was brushing his molars—you would hardly know he was using a mouse, except for the pink tip of the tail that emerged from his fist, and the squeaks that echoed from the back of his throat...

Stop that at once! Do I have to go get the trap?

We watched him huddle down beneath the sink, pleading with his eyes as he let go of the tail and swallowed the mouse.

Oh, see what you've done! My mother threw her hands in the air. And now how will you take care of your teeth?

THE LAUGHING MATHEMATICIAN

SHORTLY BEFORE HIS EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY, the mathematician devised a method of solving equations by laughing. He began with arithmetic laughing, which was very simple—one laugh represented the number one, two laughs represented the number two, and so on. Then he began geometric laughing—laughing in circles, laughing in arcs, laughing out radii and circumferences. Logarithmic laughter turned out to be a hideous titter, beginning high in the throat and ending low in the chest, with the nostrils pinched shut. The other mathematicians couldn't get any work done when they heard this laugh, so they kicked him out of the academy. On the street, he began algebraic laughter. This proved to be harmful to his health—it involved the brachia, and sounded like tubercular coughing. The coughing kept the whole town awake. His relatives brought him to the hospital, where he lay wheezing and solving equations with three variables. He wanted to master calculus through laughter before he died. Whinnying failed, snickering didn't suffice, and throaty chuckling made a hash of irrational numbers. Doctors scurried into the operating room, pulling on latex gloves and adjusting their robes. Sniggering might have worked, except a high-pitched whistle from his esophagus kept turning the answers negative. Just before the anesthesiologist approached, the mathematician chortled. But as the ether mask descended, he realized he had gone too far, had gone beyond mathematics into physics, and was now struggling to decipher the building blocks of matter itself...