

KATIE'S LETTER

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“**H**E ATE *ALL* my poppies,” Mrs. Robinson said as she came in the back door.

“Flowers?” asked Katie, who was writing a letter to her father. “Woodchucks eat flowers?”

Katie’s mother gave an unhappy nod.

Katie had only seen the woodchuck once, a dark, furry shadow rippling off across their lawn into the woods.

“He ate the peas yesterday,” Mrs. Robinson added. “I don’t think I can wait till Daddy returns from his business trip. I’d better call Curt.”

Curt was a farmer, fisherman, and hunter with a wiry white beard and blue-black eyes. He plowed out the Robinson’s driveway in the winter and helped Mr. Robinson when old trees had to be cut down. Once he’d brought a baby owl by for Katie to see before he let it go.

Curt arrived an hour later in his pickup.

“How large is this chuck?” he asked Katie and her mother.

Katie spread her arms wide.

Curt scratched his beard and grinned. “That’s no baby. We’ll use the big trap.” He lifted a rectangular metal cage out of the back of his truck. “Got some fresh broccoli and peanut butter?”

“Peanut butter?” said Katie.

“Yup, peanut butter.”

Curt spread peanut butter on the broccoli and tied it to a platter at the bottom of the cage with some string. “You want him to pull at the broccoli so the levers click and the doors shut on him,” Curt explained.

“What’ll we do when we catch him?” Katie asked.

“We’ll take him far away. At least ten miles. Anything less and he’ll be back quicker than you can hook a worm.”

Katie stared at him. “How would he find his way back here?”

Curt shook his head “Don’t ask me. I just think that animals know more than we realize. A lot more. Sometimes I think they can even understand us.”

The broccoli sat in the trap all afternoon, untouched. Katie watched it from her bedroom window till dark. The next morning she peered out. The trap doors were shut, but the cage was empty. Katie found the string on the edge of the lawn.

“Keep setting the trap,” Curt told them over the phone. “He’s bound to get careless at some point.”

But the woodchuck didn’t get careless. He not only cut the string and ate a lot of broccoli and peanut butter, he started on the beans, too.

Curt came by to view the damage. This time he didn’t grin. “He’s a smart one.”

“I’ve seen him once,” said Katie. “He hides in a hole under the stone wall when I come out.”

“Will we have any garden this year?” Mrs. Robinson asked.

Curt scratched his beard. “Looks like you either put up a fence, get a dog, or shoot him.”

“Shoot him?” cried Katie.

“Sometimes that’s the only thing you can do. I had to shoot a chuck for the Clements last week. That critter leveled their garden two years in a row, left nothing but dirt.”

“Can you put up a fence for us?” Mrs. Robinson asked.

Curt nodded.

Curt put the wire fence in deep.

For two days the garden went untouched. Then, early that Saturday morning, Katie caught a glimpse of the dark figure standing upright, sniffing the air. He was on the wrong side of the fence. He’d tunneled deeper than Curt had dug. He’d finished the beans.

“We can’t get a dog because of your allergy,” Mrs. Robinson said at breakfast.

“Please, Mum, don’t let Curt shoot him.”

Katie's mother sighed. "I know you love animals, Katie. I do, too. But I also love my garden, and we won't have one with him around. There are woods and fields out there with plenty of food for him, but he goes right on being a pest."

"Can't you talk to him, Mum?" Katie asked. "Curt thinks animals can understand us."

"We have been talking to him. That's what we were doing when we tried the trap and the fence. We told him to stay out of our garden. He's not listening."

Katie went out and sat on the stone wall, thinking. She wished she could call the woodchuck on the telephone. She'd tell him he was smart because he got the broccoli out of the trap and he dug down under the fence, but he wasn't smart enough to stop being a pest.

The back door clicked open.

"Katie!" Mrs. Robinson called. "I'm going to the post office in half an hour. You want to finish that letter you were writing to Daddy?"

"Yes...I'm coming!" As Katie walked up to the house, her heart started beating hard. She stopped and clapped her hands together. Of course! She knew what she'd do—she'd write a letter to the woodchuck! She'd talk to him that way. She wouldn't mail his letter at the post office; she'd put it in the garden.

Katie found an old wooden shingle in the garage, took a red marker, and wrote on it:

Dear Woodchuck,
Please stay OUT of our
garden or you will be sorry.
Love,
Katie Robinson

She climbed over the fence into the garden, pushed the shingle into the dirt, and went back to the house to finish the letter to her dad.

Curt stopped by one morning a few days later while Katie was getting ready for school.

“How are you doing with that chuck?” she heard him ask her mother.

“He’s still around,” Mrs. Robinson said. “I saw him yesterday near the mailbox.”

“Did he try to dig his way under the fence?”

“Oh yes, he got in once right after you put it in. Then the strangest thing happened—he lost interest in the garden. I don’t know why.”

Curt chuckled. “He’s real smart. Some animals know when you mean business.”

Katie couldn’t stop grinning. She hadn’t told her mother or Curt about the shingle; now she wanted to show it to them.

She ran to the garden and climbed over the fence. There were shiny green leaves everywhere. Katie lifted leaf after leaf, but she couldn’t find the shingle. There wasn’t a trace of it. As she knelt in the wet earth, she felt someone watching her.

Katie looked up and froze. The woodchuck was by the stone wall. He was so close, she could see his black, curved nails. They stared at each other for one long minute. Then he slid past her and headed up the drive.