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I started this for Holly

I finished it for Maddy

Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.

—G. K. Chesterton

I.

Coraline discovered the door a little while after they moved into the house.

It was a very old house—it had an attic under the roof and a cellar under the ground and an overgrown garden with huge old trees in it.

Coraline's family didn't own all of the house—it was too big for that. Instead they owned part of it.

There were other people who lived in the old house.

Miss Spink and Miss Forcible lived in the flat below Coraline's, on the ground floor. They were both old and round, and they lived in their flat with a number of aging Highland terriers who had names like Hamish and Andrew and Jock. Once upon a time Miss Spink and Miss Forcible had been actresses, as Miss Spink told Coraline the first time she met her.

“You see, Caroline,” Miss Spink said, getting Coraline's name wrong, “both myself and Miss Forcible were famous actresses, in our time. We trod the boards, luvvy. Oh, don't let Hamish eat the fruitcake, or he'll be up all night with his tummy.”

“It's Coraline. Not Caroline. Coraline,” said Coraline.

In the flat above Coraline's, under the roof, was a crazy old man with a big mustache. He told Coraline that he was training a mouse circus. He wouldn't let anyone see it.

“One day, little Caroline, when they are all ready, everyone in the whole world will see the wonders of my mouse circus. You ask me why you cannot see it now. Is that what you asked me?”

“No,” said Coraline quietly, “I asked you not to call me Caroline. It's Coraline.”

“The reason you cannot see the mouse circus,” said the man upstairs, “is that the mice are not yet ready and rehearsed. Also, they refuse to play the songs I have written for them. All the songs I have written for the mice to play *goompah oompah*. But the white mice will only play *toodle oodle*, like that. I am thinking of trying them on different types of cheese.”

Coraline didn't think there really was a mouse circus. She thought the old man was probably making it up.

The day after they moved in, Coraline went exploring.

She explored the garden. It was a big garden: at the very back was an old tennis court, but no one in the house played tennis and the fence around the court had holes in it and the net had mostly rotted away; there was an old rose garden, filled with stunted, flyblown rosebushes; there was a rockery that was all rocks; there was a fairy ring, made of squidgy brown toadstools which smelled dreadful if you accidentally trod on them.

There was also a well. On the first day Coraline's family moved in, Miss Spink and Miss Forcible made a point of telling Coraline how dangerous the well was, and they warned her to be sure she kept away from it. So Coraline set off to explore for it, so that she knew where it was, to keep away from it properly.

She found it on the third day, in an overgrown meadow beside the tennis court, behind a clump of trees—a low brick circle almost hidden in the high grass. The well had been covered up by wooden boards, to stop anyone falling in. There was a small knothole in one of the boards, and Coraline spent an afternoon dropping pebbles and acorns through the hole and waiting, and counting, until she heard the *plop* as they hit the water far below.

Coraline also explored for animals. She found a hedgehog, and a snakeskin (but no snake), and a rock that looked just like a frog, and a toad that looked just like a rock.

There was also a haughty black cat, who sat on walls and tree stumps and watched her but slipped

away if ever she went over to try to play with it.

That was how she spent her first two weeks in the house—exploring the garden and the grounds.

Her mother made her come back inside for dinner and for lunch. And Coraline had to make sure she dressed up warm before she went out, for it was a very cold summer that year; but go out she did, exploring, every day until the day it rained, when Coraline had to stay inside.

“What should I do?” asked Coraline.

“Read a book,” said her mother. “Watch a video. Play with your toys. Go and pester Miss Spink or Miss Forcible, or the crazy old man upstairs.”

“No,” said Coraline. “I don't want to do those things. I want to explore.”

“I don't really mind what you do,” said Coraline's mother, “as long as you don't make a mess.”

Coraline went over to the window and watched the rain come down. It wasn't the kind of rain you could go out in—it was the other kind, the kind that threw itself down from the sky and splashed where it landed. It was rain that meant business, and currently its business was turning the garden into a muddy, wet soup.

Coraline had watched all the videos. She was bored with her toys, and she'd read all her books.

She turned on the television. She went from channel to channel to channel, but there was nothing on but men in suits talking about the stock market, and talk shows. Eventually, she found something to watch: it was the last half of a natural history program about something called protective coloration. She watched animals, birds, and insects which disguised themselves as leaves or twigs or other animals to escape from things that could hurt them. She enjoyed it, but it ended too soon and was followed by a program about a cake factory.

It was time to talk to her father.

Coraline's father was home. Both of her parents worked, doing things on computers, which meant that they were home a lot of the time. Each of them had their own study.

“Hello Coraline,” he said when she came in, without turning round.

“Mmph,” said Coraline. “It's raining.”

“Yup,” said her father. “It's bucketing down.”

“No,” said Coraline. “It's just raining. Can I go outside?”

“What does your mother say?”

“She says you're not going out in weather like that, Coraline Jones.”

“Then, no.”

“But I want to carry on exploring.”

“Then explore the flat,” suggested her father. “Look—here’s a piece of paper and a pen. Count all the doors and windows. List everything blue. Mount an expedition to discover the hot water tank. And leave me alone to work.”

“Can I go into the drawing room?” The drawing room was where the Joneses kept the expensive (and uncomfortable) furniture Coraline’s grandmother had left them when she died. Coraline wasn’t allowed in there. Nobody went in there. It was only for best.

“If you don’t make a mess. And you don’t touch anything.”

Coraline considered this carefully, then she took the paper and pen and went off to explore the inside of the flat.

She discovered the hot water tank (it was in a cupboard in the kitchen).

She counted everything blue (153).

She counted the windows (21).

She counted the doors (14).

Of the doors that she found, thirteen opened and closed. The other—the big, carved, brown wooden door at the far corner of the drawing room—was locked.

She said to her mother, “Where does that door go?”

“Nowhere, dear.”

“It has to go somewhere.”

Her mother shook her head. “Look,” she told Coraline.

She reached up and took a string of keys from the top of the kitchen doorframe. She sorted through them carefully, and selected the oldest, biggest, blackest, rustiest key. They went into the drawing room. She unlocked the door with the key.

The door swung open.

Her mother was right. The door didn’t go anywhere. It opened onto a brick wall.

“When this place was just one house,” said Coraline’s mother, “that door went somewhere. When they turned the house into flats, they simply bricked it up. The other side is the empty flat on the other side of the house, the one that’s still for sale.”

She shut the door and put the string of keys back on top of the kitchen doorframe.

“You didn’t lock it,” said Coraline.

Her mother shrugged. “Why should I lock it?” she asked. “It doesn’t go anywhere.”

Coraline didn't say anything.

It was nearly dark outside now, and the rain was still coming down, pattering against the windows and blurring the lights of the cars in the street outside.

Coraline's father stopped working and made them all dinner.

Coraline was disgusted. "Daddy," she said, "you've made *arecipe* again."

"It's leek and potato stew with a tarragon garnish and melted Gruyère cheese," he admitted.

Coraline sighed. Then she went to the freezer and got out some microwave chips and a microwave minipizza.

"You know I don't like recipes," she told her father, while her dinner went around and around and the little red numbers on the microwave oven counted down to zero.

"If you tried it, maybe you'd like it," said Coraline's father, but she shook her head.

That night, Coraline lay awake in her bed. The rain had stopped, and she was almost asleep when something went *t-t-t-t-t*. She sat up in bed.

Something went *kreeee...*

...aaaak

Coraline got out of bed and looked down the hall, but saw nothing strange. She walked down the hall. From her parents' bedroom came a low snoring—that was her father—and an occasional sleeping mutter—that was her mother.

Coraline wondered if she'd dreamed it, whatever it was.

Something moved.

It was little more than a shadow, and it scuttled down the darkened hall fast, like a little patch of night.

She hoped it wasn't a spider. Spiders made Coraline intensely uncomfortable.

The black shape went into the drawing room, and Coraline followed it a little nervously.

The room was dark. The only light came from the hall, and Coraline, who was standing in the doorway, cast a huge and distorted shadow onto the drawing room carpet—she looked like a thin giant woman.

Coraline was just wondering whether or not she ought to turn on the lights when she saw the black shape edge slowly out from beneath the sofa. It paused, and then dashed silently across the carpet toward the farthest corner of the room.

There was no furniture in that corner of the room.

Coraline turned on the light.

There was nothing in the corner. Nothing but the old door that opened onto the brick wall.

She was sure that her mother had shut the door, but now it was ever so slightly open. Just a crack. Coraline went over to it and looked in. There was nothing there—just a wall, built of red bricks.

Coraline closed the old wooden door, turned out the light, and went to bed.

She dreamed of black shapes that slid from place to place, avoiding the light, until they were all gathered together under the moon. Little black shapes with little red eyes and sharp yellow teeth.

They started to sing,

We are small but we are many

We are many we are small

We were here before you rose

We will be here when you fall.

Their voices were high and whispering and slightly whiney. They made Coraline feel uncomfortable.

Then Coraline dreamed a few commercials, and after that she dreamed of nothing at all.

II.

The next day it had stopped raining, but a thick white fog had lowered over the house.

“I'm going for a walk,” said Coraline.

“Don't go too far,” said her mother. “And dress up warmly.”

Coraline put on her blue coat with a hood, her red scarf, and her yellow Wellington boots.

She went out.

Miss Spink was walking her dogs. “Hello, Caroline,” said Miss Spink. “Rotten weather.”

“Yes,” said Coraline.

“I played Portia once,” said Miss Spink. “Miss Forcible talks about her Ophelia, but it was my Portia they came to see. When we trod the boards.”

Miss Spink was bundled up in pullovers and cardigans, so she seemed more small and circular than ever. She looked like a large, fluffy egg. She wore thick glasses that made her eyes seem huge.

“They used to send flowers to my dressing room. They*did*,” she said.

“Who did?” asked Coraline.

Miss Spink looked around cautiously, looking over first one shoulder and then over the other, peering into the mists as though someone might be listening.

“*Men*,” she whispered. Then she tugged the dogs to heel and waddled off back toward the house.

Coraline continued her walk.

She was three quarters of the way around the house when she saw Miss Forcible, standing at the door to the flat she shared with Miss Spink.

“Have you seen Miss Spink, Caroline?”

Coraline told her that she had, and that Miss Spink was out walking the dogs.

“I do hope she doesn't get lost—it'll bring on her shingles if she does, you'll see,” said Miss Forcible. “You'd have to be an explorer to find your way around in this fog.”

“I'm an explorer,” said Coraline.

“Of course you are, luvvy,” said Miss Forcible. “Don't get lost, now.”

Coraline continued walking through the gardens in the gray mist. She always kept in sight of the house. After about ten minutes of walking she found herself back where she had started.

The hair over her eyes was limp and wet, and her face felt damp.

“Ahoy! Caroline!” called the crazy old man upstairs.

“Oh, hullo,” said Coraline.

She could hardly see the old man through the mist.

He walked down the steps on the outside of the house that led up past Coraline's front door to the door of his flat. He walked down very slowly. Coraline waited at the bottom of the stairs.

“The mice do not like the mist,” he told her. “It makes their whiskers droop.”

“I don't like the mist much, either,” admitted Coraline.

The old man leaned down, so close that the bottoms of his mustache tickled Coraline's ear. “The mice have a message for you,” he whispered.

Coraline didn't know what to say.

“The message is this. *Don't go through the door*.” He paused. “Does that mean anything to you?”

“No,” said Coraline.

The old man shrugged. “They are funny, the mice. They get things wrong. They got your name wrong, you know. They kept saying Coraline. Not Caroline. Not Caroline at all.”

He picked up a milk bottle from the bottom of the stairs and started back up to his attic flat.

Coraline went indoors. Her mother was working in her study. Her mother's study smelled of flowers.

“What shall I do?” asked Coraline.

“When do you go back to school?” asked her mother.

“Next week,” said Coraline.

“Hmph,” said her mother. “I suppose I shall have to get you new school clothes. Remind me, dear, or else I'll forget,” and she went back to typing things on the computer screen.

“What shall *Ido* ?” repeated Coraline.

“Draw something,” Her mother passed her a sheet of paper and a ballpoint pen.

Coraline tried drawing the mist. After ten minutes of drawing she still had a white sheet of paper with

M T

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I

—written on it in one corner in slightly wiggly letters. She grunted and passed it to her mother.

“Mm. Very modern, dear,” said Coraline's mother.

Coraline crept into the drawing room and tried to open the old door in the corner. It was locked once more. She supposed her mother must have locked it again. She shrugged.

Coraline went to see her father.

He had his back to the door as he typed. “Go away,” he said cheerfully as she walked in.

“I'm bored,” she said.

“Learn how to tap-dance,” he suggested, without turning around.

Coraline shook her head. “Why don't you play with me?” she asked.

“Busy,” he said. “Working,” he added. He still hadn't turned around to look at her. “Why don't you go and bother Miss Spink and Miss Forcible?”

Coraline put on her coat and pulled up her hood and went out of the house. She went downstairs. She rang the door of Miss Spink and Miss Forcible's flat. Coraline could hear a frenzied woofing as the Scottie dogs ran out into the hall. After a while Miss Spink opened the door.

“Oh, it's you, Caroline,” she said. “Angus, Hamish, Bruce, down now, luvvies. It's only Caroline. Come in, dear. Would you like a cup of tea?”

The flat smelled of furniture polish and dogs.

“Yes, please,” said Coraline. Miss Spink led her into a dusty little room, which she called the parlor. On the walls were black-and-white photographs of pretty women, and theater programs in frames. Miss Forcible was sitting in one of the armchairs, knitting hard.

They poured Coraline a cup of tea in a little pink bone china cup, with a saucer. They gave her a dry Garibaldi biscuit to go with it.

Miss Forcible looked at Miss Spink, picked up her knitting, and took a deep breath. “Anyway, April. As I was saying: you still have to admit, there's life in the old dog yet.”

“Miriam, dear, neither of us is as young as we were.”

“Madame Arcati,” replied Miss Forcible. “The nurse in *Romeo*. Lady Bracknell. Character parts. They can't retire you from the stage.”

“Now, Miriam, *we agreed*,” said Miss Spink. Coraline wondered if they'd forgotten she was there. They weren't making much sense; she decided they were having an argument as old and comfortable as an armchair, the kind of argument that no one ever really wins or loses but which can go on forever, if both parties are willing.

She sipped her tea.

“I'll read the leaves, if you want,” said Miss Spink to Coraline.

“Sorry?” said Coraline.

“The tea leaves, dear. I'll read your future.”

Coraline passed Miss Spink her cup. Miss Spink peered shortsightedly at the black tea leaves in the bottom. She pursed her lips.

“You know, Caroline,” she said, after a while, “you are in terrible danger.”

Miss Forcible snorted, and put down her knitting. “Don't be silly, April. Stop scaring the girl. Your eyes are going. Pass me that cup, child.”

Coraline carried the cup over to Miss Forcible. Miss Forcible looked into it carefully, shook her head, and looked into it again.

“Oh dear,” she said. “You were right, April. She *is* in danger.”

“See, Miriam,” said Miss Spink triumphantly. “My eyes are as good as they ever were....”

“What am I in danger from?” asked Coraline.

Misses Spink and Forcible stared at her blankly. “It didn't say,” said Miss Spink. “Tea leaves aren't reliable for that kind of thing. Not really. They're good for general, but not for specifics.”

“What should I do then?” asked Coraline, who was slightly alarmed by this.

“Don't wear green in your dressing room,” suggested Miss Spink.

“Or mention the Scottish play,” added Miss Forcible.

Coraline wondered why so few of the adults she had met made any sense. She sometimes wondered who they thought they were talking to.

“And be very, very careful,” said Miss Spink. She got up from the armchair and went over to the fireplace. On the mantelpiece was a small jar, and Miss Spink took off the top of the jar and began to pull things out of it. There was a tiny china duck, a thimble, a strange little brass coin, two paper clips and a stone with a hole in it.

She passed Coraline the stone with a hole in it.

“What's it for?” asked Coraline. The hole went all the way through the middle of the stone. She held it up to the window and looked through it.

“It might help,” said Miss Spink. “They're good for bad things, sometimes.”

Coraline put on her coat, said good-bye to Misses Spink and Forcible and to the dogs, and went outside.

The mist hung like blindness around the house. She walked slowly to the stairs up to her family's flat, and then stopped and looked around.

In the mist, it was a ghost-world. *In danger?* thought Coraline to herself. It sounded exciting. It didn't sound like a bad thing. Not really.

Coraline went back upstairs, her fist closed tightly around her new stone.

III.

The next day the sun shone, and Coraline's mother took her into the nearest large town to buy clothes for school. They dropped her father off at the railway station. He was going into London for the day to see some people.

Coraline waved him good-bye.

They went to the department store to buy the school clothes.

Coraline saw some Day-Glo green gloves she liked a lot. Her mother refused to buy them for her, preferring instead to buy white socks, navy blue school underpants, four gray blouses, and a dark gray skirt.

“But Mum, *everybody* at school's got gray blouses and everything. *Nobody's* got green gloves. I could be the only one.”

Her mother ignored her; she was talking to the shop assistant. They were talking about which kind of sweater to get for Coraline, and were agreeing that the best thing to do would be to get one that was embarrassingly large and baggy, in the hopes that one day she might grow into it.

Coraline wandered off and looked at a display of Wellington boots shaped like frogs and ducks and rabbits.

Then she wandered back.

“Coraline? Oh, there you are. Where on earth were you?”

“I was kidnapped by aliens,” said Coraline. “They came down from outer space with ray guns, but I fooled them by wearing a wig and laughing in a foreign accent, and I escaped.”

“Yes, dear. Now, I think you could do with some more hair clips, don't you?”

“No.”

“Well, let's say half a dozen, to be on the safe side,” said her mother.

Coraline didn't say anything.

In the car on the way back home, Coraline said, “What's in the empty flat?”

“I don't know. Nothing, I expect. It probably looks like our flat before we moved in. Empty rooms.”

“Do you think you could get into it from our flat?”

“Not unless you can walk through bricks, dear.”

“Oh.”

They got home around lunchtime. The sun was shining, although the day was cold. Coraline's mother looked in the fridge and found a sad little tomato and a piece of cheese with green stuff growing on it. There was only a crust in the bread bin.

“I'd better dash down to the shops and get some fish fingers or something,” said her mother. “Do you want to come?”

“No,” said Coraline.

“Suit yourself,” said her mother, and left. Then she came back and got her purse and car keys and went out again.

Coraline was bored.

She flipped through a book her mother was reading about native people in a distant country; how every day they would take pieces of white silk and draw on them in wax, then dip the silks in dye, then draw on them more in wax and dye them some more, then boil the wax out in hot water, and then finally, throw the now-beautiful cloths on a fire and burn them to ashes.

It seemed particularly pointless to Coraline, but she hoped that the people enjoyed it.

She was still bored, and her mother wasn't yet home.

Coraline got a chair and pushed it over to the kitchen door. She climbed onto the chair and reached up. She got down, then got a broom from the broom cupboard. She climbed back on the chair again and reached up with the broom.

Chink.

She climbed down from the chair and picked up the keys. She smiled triumphantly. Then she leaned the broom against the wall and went into the drawing room.

The family did not use the drawing room. They had inherited the furniture from Coraline's grandmother, along with a wooden coffee table, a side table, a heavy glass ashtray, and the oil painting of a bowl of fruit. Coraline could never work out why anyone would want to paint a bowl of fruit. Other than that, the room was empty: there were no knickknacks on the mantelpiece, no statues or clocks; nothing that made it feel comfortable or lived-in.

The old black key felt colder than any of the others. She pushed it into the keyhole. It turned smoothly, with a satisfying *clunk*.

Coraline stopped and listened. She knew she was doing something wrong, and she was trying to listen for her mother coming back, but she heard nothing. Then Coraline put her hand on the doorknob and turned it; and, finally, she opened the door.

It opened on to a dark hallway. The bricks had gone as if they'd never been there. There was a cold, musty smell coming through the open doorway: it smelled like something very old and very slow.

Coraline went through the door.

She wondered what the empty flat would be like—if that was where the corridor led.

Coraline walked down the corridor uneasily. There was something very familiar about it.

The carpet beneath her feet was the same carpet they had in her flat. The wallpaper was the same wallpaper they had. The picture hanging in the hall was the same that they had hanging in their hallway at home.

She knew where she was: she was in her own home. She hadn't left.

She shook her head, confused.

She stared at the picture hanging on the wall: no, it wasn't exactly the same. The picture they had in their own hallway showed a boy in old-fashioned clothes staring at some bubbles. But now the expression on his face was different—he was looking at the bubbles as if he was planning to do something very nasty indeed to them. And there was something peculiar about his eyes.

Coraline stared at his eyes, trying to figure out what exactly was different.

She almost had it when somebody said, "Coraline?"

It sounded like her mother. Coraline went into the kitchen, where the voice had come from. A woman stood in the kitchen with her back to Coraline. She looked a little like Coraline's mother. Only...

Only her skin was white as paper.

Only she was taller and thinner.

Only her fingers were too long, and they never stopped moving, and her dark red fingernails were curved and sharp.

“Coraline?” the woman said. “Is that you?”

And then she turned around. Her eyes were big black buttons.

“Lunchtime, Coraline,” said the woman.

“Who are you?” asked Coraline.

“I’m your other mother,” said the woman. “Go and tell your other father that lunch is ready,” She opened the door of the oven. Suddenly Coraline realized how hungry she was. It smelled wonderful. “Well, go on.”

Coraline went down the hall, to where her father’s study was. She opened the door. There was a man in there, sitting at the keyboard, with his back to her. “Hello,” said Coraline. “I—I mean, she said to say that lunch is ready.”

The man turned around.

His eyes were buttons, big and black and shiny.

“Hello Coraline,” he said. “I’m starving.”

He got up and went with her into the kitchen. They sat at the kitchen table, and Coraline’s other mother brought them lunch. A huge, golden-brown roasted chicken, fried potatoes, tiny green peas. Coraline shoveled the food into her mouth. It tasted wonderful.

“We’ve been waiting for you for a long time,” said Coraline’s other father.

“For me?”

“Yes,” said the other mother. “It wasn’t the same here without you. But we knew you’d arrive one day, and then we could be a proper family. Would you like some more chicken?”

It was the best chicken that Coraline had ever eaten. Her mother sometimes made chicken, but it was always out of packets or frozen, and was very dry, and it never tasted of anything. When Coraline’s father cooked chicken he bought real chicken, but he did strange things to it, like stewing it in wine, or stuffing it with prunes, or baking it in pastry, and Coraline would always refuse to touch it on principle.

She took some more chicken.

“I didn’t know I had another mother,” said Coraline, cautiously.

“Of course you do. Everyone does,” said the other mother, her black button eyes gleaming. “After lunch I thought you might like to play in your room with the rats.”

“The rats?”

“From upstairs.”

Coraline had never seen a rat, except on television. She was quite looking forward to it. This was turning out to be a very interesting day after all.

After lunch her other parents did the washing up, and Coraline went down the hall to her other bedroom.

It was different from her bedroom at home. For a start it was painted in an off-putting shade of green and a peculiar shade of pink.

Coraline decided that she wouldn't want to have to sleep in there, but that the color scheme was an awful lot more interesting than her own bedroom.

There were all sorts of remarkable things in there she'd never seen before: windup angels that fluttered around the bedroom like startled sparrows; books with pictures that writhed and crawled and shimmered; little dinosaur skulls that chattered their teeth as she passed. A whole toy box filled with wonderful toys.

This is more like it, thought Coraline. She looked out of the window. Outside, the view was the same one she saw from her own bedroom: trees, fields, and beyond them, on the horizon, distant purple hills.

Something black scurried across the floor and vanished under the bed. Coraline got down on her knees and looked under the bed. Fifty little red eyes stared back at her.

“Hello,” said Coraline. “Are you the rats?”

They came out from under the bed, blinking their eyes in the light. They had short, soot-black fur, little red eyes, pink paws like tiny hands, and pink, hairless tails like long, smooth worms.

“Can you talk?” she asked.

The largest, blackest of the rats shook its head. It had an unpleasant sort of smile, Coraline thought.

“Well,” asked Coraline, “*whatdo* you do?”

The rats formed a circle.

Then they began to climb on top of each other, carefully but swiftly, until they had formed a pyramid with the largest rat at the top.

The rats began to sing, in high, whispery voices,

We have teeth and we have tails

We have tails we have eyes

We were here before you fell

You will be here when we rise.

It wasn't a pretty song. Coraline was sure she'd heard it before, or something like it, although she was unable to remember exactly where.

Then the pyramid fell apart, and the rats scampered, fast and black, toward the door.

The other crazy old man upstairs was standing in the doorway, holding a tall black hat in his hands. The rats scampered up him, burrowing into his pockets, into his shirt, up his trouser legs, down his neck.

The largest rat climbed onto the old man's shoulders, swung up on the long gray mustache, past the big black button eyes, and onto the top of the man's head.

In seconds the only evidence that the rats were there at all were the restless lumps under the man's clothes, forever sliding from place to place across him; and there was still the largest rat, who stared down, with glittering red eyes, at Coraline from the man's head.

The old man put his hat on, and the last rat was gone.

"Hello Coraline," said the other old man upstairs. "I heard you were here. It is time for the rats to have their dinner. But you can come up with me, if you like, and watch them feed."

There was something hungry in the old man's button eyes that made Coraline feel uncomfortable. "No, thank you," she said. "I'm going outside to explore."

The old man nodded, very slowly. Coraline could hear the rats whispering to each other, although she could not tell what they were saying.

She was not certain that she wanted to know what they were saying.

Her other parents stood in the kitchen doorway as she walked down the corridor, smiling identical smiles, and waving slowly. "Have a nice time outside," said her other mother.

"We'll just wait here for you to come back," said her other father.

When Coraline got to the front door, she turned back and looked at them. They were still watching her, and waving, and smiling.

Coraline walked outside, and down the steps.