

With good intentions, my sister suggested a cassette of nature calls for my birthday. Inspired by the way she enjoys leaving her town house for the ranch, she thought I needed to hear the recorded trill of the western king bird and the gentle hum of the European bumble bee instead of the actual whir of a grasshopper off the window pane, or the thump of a sand beetle's shell dragging on the kitchen floor.

I was having all the nature I could stand. Jumbo grasshoppers were so thick in the yard, the ground squirrel living by the garage moved into my office. On a Monday, the cleaning lady flushed the squirrel from under my desk. In the scramble, she turned her furniture polish spray can into mace, hitting the victim with a blast so potent, the squirrel fell back on its hocks so far it walked like a kangaroo.

Via cell phone, I translated her description in Spanish of *un animlito con cola* to be a wood lizard. Before I reached the scene, my grandson came in from grubbing mesquite. He decided she'd seen a kangaroo rat, so he baited a trap with his favorite food, peanut butter. While he was baiting the trap, he made a two-inch thick peanut

butter and jelly sandwich to dip in a 20-ounce glass of milk.

The maid left early, the grandson went back to the barn, the peanut butter dried on the trap trigger and crumbled on the floor, and I came home and jumped a half-blind ground squirrel from behind Mother's portable dishwasher.

The ground squirrel sought refuge behind the refrigerator, the maid called to report she needed lemon furniture polish, and my grandson's cell phone buzzed underneath his pillow, meaning Katherine or Bertha one was trying to disrupt the work. Seeking refuge, I retreated to the office to find a lemon oil smell that started a deluge of discharge from my sinuses that'd make the thaw from the 189 Great Chinook in Great Falls, Montana seem like a leak in a wading pool.

Unable to work in the office, I swept the grasshoppers off the back walk and the door screen, preparing to prop the door back for the squirrel to escape. In came my grandson from the barn, muttering that he'd closed the door I'd left open. He returned his phone calls. Went back to the barn slamming the door so hard, the rat trap snapped and scared the ground squirrel back behind the dishwasher.

Strongest brew in the house was "African bush tea." Trackers in Nairobi drink the black bush tea to hide the human odor of fear from raging lions and fierce water buffalo. The tea is so flavorful the secretions from the pores and the mist from the breath smells of the rich blossoms of jungle flora, causing cubs and calves alike to stray from their mothers. Bush tea also settles a rifleman's nerves to the point he can drop charging bull elephants at a range of 25 yards as steady as popping the clay targets in a shooting gallery. Endorsed by marriage counselors countrywide, bush tea also takes the fire from the most desperate martial bouts.

In a china cup of boiling water, I dropped two bags of "bush." Allowed the tea to steep six minutes instead of three. Smashed a sugar cube in half with the back of a thick-bladed knife to take the tea to peak strength. Sat sipping the tea at the kitchen table and rolling a mop handle in my palms, ready to bludgeon the squirrel if she moved.

The back door had to be kept closed, I knew, or the grasshoppers would swarm the place. Living all these 70 summers on the 09 Divide, grasshoppers lore becomes first and second nature. For example, jumbos eat their dead, but contrary to common belief, they are not cannibals, just

neat. But this year is the first time I've seen the hoppers so thick that coachwhips had stretch marks from gorging on the insects.

The tea began to work. I armed myself with an upright vacuum cleaner and attachment whose suction set off a storm of fuzz balls underneath the dishwasher. Before I could poke the squirrel with the mop handle, she fled through a hole under the kitchen sink, catching a whiff, I think, of an old lemon peel in the swirling trash.

My sister meant well. Instead of buying nature calls, however, I need to open a studio to record this living pestilence. After near asphyxiation, the ground squirrel is content to stay outside. Lemon oil spray is on the restricted list. My grandson looks off in the distance as he walks to and from the barn, signaling that the day is close when he will bolt for the city. One of these mornings, peanut butter sandwiches aren't going to be potent enough to keep him here.