



Paws for thought as uninvited guests defy lockdown order

By Melissa Coburn

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The five-day lockdown in Melbourne hasn't deterred everyone from making uninvited visits to our home.

At first we didn't know they had arrived. The odd creak in the middle of the night was quickly dismissed as the old apartment block shifting or shared pipes knocking.

A couple of conversations changed our view.

At the supermarket while at the checkout, a customer returned her plastic-wrapped loaf of bread asking that it be exchanged, saying that the plastic bore signs of rodent bite marks. The shop assistant did not seem surprised, readily agreeing to an exchange. She told me that construction in the area had displaced mice and they had become a challenge for the store cleaners.

Two neighbours in the same block as mine reported signs of mice in their apartments. One said that she had put down flour in her kitchen and discovered delicate mouse footprints all over her floor.

The thought that something might be coexisting in the house, waiting for the cover of darkness before running amok, is disturbing. Every night sound sets you on edge: is it just a change in the humming of the fridge or something moving stealthily?

We needed a better picture of what was happening at night in our home. We sprinkled flour on the floor of the kitchen near the cupboards, fridge and oven and also across the threshold of the nearby bedroom. Then, in the spirit of *The Elves and the Shoemaker*, we went to bed, not sure what we would find in the morning.

The good news is that there was no sign that the bedroom threshold had been crossed. The flour was as we had left it, like pristine snow, undisturbed.

The bad news was that, judging from the tiny footprints going in all directions in the kitchen, we had hosted some kind of miniature bush dance last night, replete with do-si-do-ing, heel-and-toe steps, sashaying, multiple exchanges of partners and some freeform dance moves that might have involved breakdancing, moonwalking and acrobatics.

What is still a mystery is the unidentified presence among the dancers of one whose belly left a largish teardrop-shaped print in the flour beside a three-clawed marking. Was this the calling card of an alpha mouse or something much bigger?

What with recent reports of mouse infestations in the hotel rooms of tennis players quarantining in Melbourne for the Australian Open I have to ask: do we have a mouse problem in our city? The lockdown has brought us and our uninvited guests together in uncomfortable proximity. The apartment isn't big enough for all of us. One of us has to go and I'm really, really hoping it's them.