

THE MOUSE WHO ATE THE CHEESE and those who believed, those who knew, those who doubted¹

Bill Alexander sat slumped in the chair looking at nothing in particular and thinking of nothing in particular. To be honest, he was bored; more bored than he could remember having been in a long time.

He wasn't supposed to be bored. It was a party and parties are places for having fun. Yet he wasn't having fun. He didn't really know why, but that's the way it was that night.

As he sat there wishing he had a good excuse to leave he saw a small piece of cheese fall to the floor. No-one else seemed to notice. Certainly the partygoer who had dropped it hadn't noticed.

Then he saw a small mouse creep shyly from under a nearby cupboard and, after several nervous, jerky glances, scurry over to the cheese and begin devouring it. Bill blinked rapidly and shook his head to make sure he wasn't dreaming. When he looked again the mouse was still there devouring the cheese. Bill sat up ready to call attention to the mouse eating the cheese, but he was too late. It had only been a tiny bit of cheese and by the time he was ready to speak the mouse had finished and scurried back under the cupboard.

Yet, there was no doubt about it. Bill knew that the mouse had eaten the cheese. He had seen it with his own eyes, and he wasn't dreaming or drunk or hallucinating.

He wasn't quite right, though, when he thought that no-one else had noticed the cheese fall. Alice Webster, who was sitting with a small group nearby saw it fall and looked up to see who had dropped it. What she saw was a handsome young man with a face that she couldn't place and yet it was familiar.

She sat there for a couple of minutes, only half aware of the discussion taking place in the group, trying to figure out who he was. When she looked down to the floor again, the piece of cheese was gone without a trace.

"That's strange," she thought. "I'm certain I saw a piece of cheese there a few minutes ago. I'm equally certain no-one could have picked it up or I would have seen them. For sure the guy who dropped it ... – I've got it! That's Brian some-thing-or-other who works at the bank. Didn't recognise him without his jacket and tie. Wonder how *he* got to this party? – ... anyhow, back to the cheese, he sure didn't pick it up and no-one else came near. Wonder what happened to it? Must have been a mouse that sneaked out from under that cupboard. It's the only logical explanation. That *must* be it."

Satisfied, she turned back to her friends and tuned in again to their discussion. She was much too level-headed to think that she knew that a mouse had eaten the cheese. However, she certainly believed that was what happened and, having thought it through, felt satisfied with that belief.

Shortly afterwards, three friends, noticing Bill sitting by himself, drifted over to join him. As they settled down he said to them: "Do you know what I just saw? I saw a tiny mouse sneak out from under that cupboard and eat a piece of cheese off the floor."

Virginia Turner, a quick-witted girl with curves in all the right places, said, "You're kidding!"

"No!" Bill said. "I'm serious. I was just sitting here when this mouse snuck out from under that cupboard over there and gobbled a bit of cheese right in front of my eyes. Believe me. It's a fact."

¹ Adapted from a story written by Stuart fowler (1993)

“What a cheeky little thing!” said Virginia, readily accepting it as a fact that the mouse had eaten the cheese. Bill obviously wasn't joking, his story was plausible enough and she knew him well enough to accept his evidence as reliable.

“Or, a very hungry one!” said Adrian Small, an old friend of Bill's. So far as Adrian was concerned, if Bill said he saw a mouse eat a piece of cheese, then there was no doubt. A mouse had eaten a piece of cheese.

By now three people, Bill Virginia and Adrian knew that the mouse had eaten the cheese. Alice still believed it but she did not know it.

The third member of the group that had joined Bill was George Smith, the owner of the flat. *He* couldn't believe his ears.

“What a load of rubbish!” He burst out. “There are no mice in this flat. It's impossible. I know. I live here.”

“But I saw it with my own eyes,” said Bill.

“I don't care what you saw,” retorted George, “or think you saw. It *couldn't* have been a mouse.” He put a lot of force into the “couldn't”.

No longer bored, Bill sat up straight in his chair, looked straight at George and, emphasising his words with his finger said, “Do you take me for an idiot? I *know* what I saw.” Speaking slowly and emphatically to emphasise each word, he added, “I saw a mouse eating cheese over there on your floor.”

Becoming more than a little heated, George quickly retorted, “That's absurd. I loathe mice so I spent a lot of money making sure that this flat is mouseproof. To be doubly sure I have the best firm of pest exterminators come in and check it over regularly. It's simply impossible for a mouse to be in here.”

Seeing a major row brewing, Virginia intervened with a suggestion, “Maybe one of the guests brought it in his pocket.”

“That's the most ridiculous idea I've heard. I thought you had more sense, Virginia, than to join in the silly game that this moron is playing” snapped George.

Standing up and moving till he was standing over Bill he said, even more slowly and emphatically than Bill had done, stabbing his finger at Bill with each word, “There are no mice in this flat.”

Seeing that he was going to get nowhere, and not wanting a fight, Bill settled back into his chair again. Looking up at George he said, with a slight shrug, “Well, have it your own way. I just know what I saw.”

“Well you saw wrong,” snapped George, and stalked away.

So Bill went on knowing what he had seen while George never did get to know that the mouse ate the cheese.

Alice missed all this, having moved to the other end of the room. She went on believing that a mouse ate the cheese but never did know it.

In the end, then, only three people knew that the mouse ate the cheese – Adrian, Virginia, and Bill. Oh, of course! The mouse also knew.

Questions for small group discussion

1. Why was Bill so sure that he knew the mouse ate the cheese? Were his reasons good ones?
2. What reasons did Virginia and Adrian have for knowing that the mouse ate the cheese? Were they adequate reasons?
3. Why did Alice never claim to know that the mouse ate the cheese, even though she firmly believed it?
4. Did Alice have reasons for believing that the mouse ate the cheese? Were they good ones?
5. Did Bill, Virginia and Adrian believe that the mouse ate the cheese?
6. Can we know anything without believing it?
7. Why did George never know that the mouse ate the cheese even though he had the same evidence as Virginia and Adrian.
8. Why did none of the others at the party not know that the mouse ate the cheese.
9. Under what circumstances would everyone at the party have known that the mouse ate the cheese?