

A black and white photograph of a person wearing a raincoat, looking down at a toad on their hand. The background is dark and rainy, with diagonal streaks representing falling rain. The title 'NIGHT OF THE SPADEFOOT TOADS' is written in a stylized, yellow, 3D font across the top. The author's name 'by Bill Harley' is at the bottom right.

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Summary: When his family moves from Tucson, Arizona to Massachusetts, fifth-grader Ben has a hard time leaving the desert he loves, but when he finds a kindred spirit in his science teacher and ends up trying to help her with some of her problems, he finally begins to feel at home.

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*This book is dedicated to all teachers of science who instill
a sense of wonder for the natural world in their students.
In particular, to my friends Suzy Williams, Rob “Otter” Brown,
Suzanne Elliot, and most especially Carol Entin, who showed me the
spadefoots close to my home on a very rainy April night.*

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Chapter One

That new teacher Mrs. Tibbets is a hundred years old, you'll see!" Frankie announces.

"*Two* hundred years old!" another boy says.

Ben Moroney ignores them as he heads down the hall. Jenny Ferreira is walking beside him. The other kids in his fifth-grade class are stretched out in a loose line up and down the hallway, headed to science class.

"Mrs. Tibbets isn't that old," Jenny tells Ben. "And she's not a new teacher. She's just been out for a while. My brother had her in fifth grade a couple of years ago."

Ben nods. He likes Jenny. She's one of the few kids who talk to him—maybe just because he sits behind her in class. He's been at Edenboro Elementary School for two months but he still feels new. Now they've got a new science teacher, too. She's new to Ben, at least. Everybody else in the class seems to know her.

“She’s a *million* years old!” Frankie shouts so everyone in the hall can hear. He bends over and hobbles down the hall like an old woman, and Tommy Miller and Dennis Dimeo laugh. Frankie thinks he’s a lot funnier than he is, but there are always kids who’ll laugh at him. Even when he’s being mean.

It’s strange to get a new science teacher at the end of March. Ben wonders where Mrs. Tibbets has been and—more importantly—why she came back.

When Ben walks into the classroom, he doesn’t see the science teacher.

But he does see the mice.

They’re in a new cage on a table against the back wall, next to stacks of textbooks and papers. He figures there are half a dozen mice in it.

Ben knows something about mice, but not as pets. He knows about mice as food for diamondback rattlesnakes. He’s seen rattlesnakes eat mice lots of times.

There are no diamondback rattlesnakes in Edenboro, Massachusetts. Ben’s pretty sure of that. The rattlesnakes he used to watch were at the Desert Museum in Tucson, Arizona, where he lived until February. Along with whipsnakes and sidewinders. And horned toads. And chuckwalla lizards. All he’s seen since they moved to Massachusetts are some squirrels and chipmunks in his backyard and some birds at the window feeder.

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Ben walks toward the cage to get a closer look at the mice. Ryan Brisson starts pounding on a desk not far from the table. "Ben! Ben!" he yells. "Sit here!" With a new teacher, there aren't any rules yet, and everyone is thinking they can sit anywhere they want. Frankie, Tommy, and Dennis have claimed desks all together on the other side of the room.

Ryan's a skinny little kid who wears glasses. One of the lenses is covered over with a patch, and the other lens magnifies his good eye. He's always peering at people out of that one big eye. He's the most hyper kid that Ben has ever met. It's like his mother gives him a pound of sugar right before he leaves for school every day. He drives Ben crazy. He drives the other kids crazy. He even drives the teachers crazy.

Ben wishes he had a real friend. Not like Jenny, who only talks to him because she sits in front of him. Or Ryan, who is officially wacko. He'd like to find someone like Toby, his best friend back in Tucson.

"Sit here!" Ryan says again, pounding on the desk like a bass drum. "It's the only empty seat!" The kid is a human noise machine. He'd be noisy even if he were sitting still. Which he never is.

Ben glances around the classroom. The new teacher, Mrs. Tibbets, hasn't arrived yet. Teachers are usually pretty good about not leaving a classroom unattended, but sometimes it happens. He looks at the mice again, then thinks about Mr. Tompkins, the director of the children's programs at the

Desert Museum. Ben loved that museum. He'd taken every summer class they offered for his age group, and he'd talked his parents into taking him there almost every Saturday during the school year.

Mr. Tompkins had promised Ben that when he was a little older he could help out with one of the summer programs. But then in December, Ben's dad was offered a new job, and two months later his family packed up and left Tucson. Now he's stuck here looking at mice in Massachusetts.

He doesn't even have his souvenirs from the museum. The box that held his favorite things from his bedroom got lost in the move, and the moving company can't find it.

Ryan is still pounding the desk, calling for Ben, but it's like the kid has forgotten what he really wants and now just enjoys the sound of his own pounding and chanting.

"Here, here, here!" he's saying.

"Ryan Brisson!" Frankie Mirley shouts out in a creaky voice. "Ryan Brisson, could you kindly shut your trap for once in your life?" He's still imitating an old woman. Dennis and Tommy and a couple of other boys who always laugh at Frankie's jokes let out loud guffaws.

Mrs. Tibbets still hasn't arrived, and the kids are all standing up talking and making noise. The longer there's not a teacher in the room, the wilder it gets. Even the mice in the cage are agitated now, running around like the students in the room. Ben knows how to handle mice. He undoes the latch,

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reaches in and scoops one up in his hand, then latches the door shut. He lets the mouse run from one hand to another, putting each hand in front of the one that's holding it.

"Hey, wow! What're you doing?" Ryan jumps out of his seat and skips over to where Ben is holding the mouse. "Are you supposed to do that?"

"No way," another kid says. "Old Mrs. Tibbets'll kill you. They're probably for a science experiment or something."

Other kids gather around. Ben is holding the mouse close to his face, looking at its twitching nose and bright eyes. He thinks about how the workers at the museum fed the mice to snakes. At first he was upset, but Mr. Tompkins had explained that it was all part of the cycle of life. "It's sad," he'd said, "but all species depend on other forms of life to live. That's why there are so many mice—to make sure the species survives. Of course, we're at the top of the food chain. There are a lot of us, but that's because there's no one to eat us."

"You should put it back," Jenny says to Ben, "before Mrs. Tibbets gets here." She's twisting her fingers in her hair, like she's the one who's going to get in trouble.

"It's okay," Ben says. "I just want to see it for a minute."

Ryan reaches for the mouse, trying to get it out of Ben's hands. "Let me hold him!" he says. "I'll be careful."

"No, Ryan," Ben says, twisting around to shield the mouse. Ryan manages to grab Ben's wrist with one hand.

“Wait!” Ben yells. But Ryan clamps down on the little animal with his other hand. Afraid the mouse will be crushed, Ben lets go.

Ryan lifts it up in the air like it’s a trophy or something. “I’ve got it!” he shrieks. “It’s squirmy!”

“Well, duh,” Frankie sneers.

“Well, duh,” three other boys echo.

Ryan tries to hold on to the mouse, but it crawls out of his hands and runs down his arm. “Aaaaaah!” he yells, and the whole class starts screaming.

The mouse leaps off Ryan’s arm, lands on the floor, and skitters under the desks, looking for a safe place to hide. But there’s no safe place—not with a bunch of fifth graders after it.

“Get it! Get it!” Frankie shouts in his old woman’s voice. “Killer mouse on the loose!” Three or four kids squeal and run to the opposite side of the room, like it really is a killer mouse and might hurt them.

“It climbed down my arm! Get it! Get it!” Ryan is dancing around the circle of kids who are on their hands and knees looking for the mouse. Three or four of them corner it in the front of the room. “I’ll get it!” Ben says, pushing his way through the crowd. He’s about to scoop it up when another voice yells out and everybody freezes where they are.

“WHAT IS GOING ON IN HERE?”

Ben turns to see a woman standing in the door of the classroom.

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There's a moment when nobody says anything, and then everybody runs to their seats, trying not to laugh, even though they know they're in trouble—it's funny and scary at the same time. Now is Ben's chance to catch the mouse, so he kneels down and scoops it up, then turns to face the teacher.

Mrs. Tibbets is an older woman, but nowhere near a hundred years old. She stands straight and tall, not bent over at all. Ben is never good at guessing how old grown-ups are, but he figures she's about as old as his Grandmother Moroney. Her long, graying hair is pulled back behind her ears in a braid that reaches partway down her back. She's wearing a bulky wool sweater and a long skirt, but the most interesting thing about her is her feet. She's wearing a pair of old leather hiking boots. Ben has never seen a teacher in hiking boots.

Before anybody can say anything else, Frankie stands and points at Ben. "He let the mouse out!" Frankie sounds happy. A lot of people like to see other people get in trouble, but Frankie *loves* it. "He let the mouse out. I told him not to!"

Mrs. Tibbets looks at Ben with her eyes squinted a little.

Ben holds the mouse up in his hands. He can feel his own heart beating. "It's okay. I caught it," he says.

"Put it back in the cage, please," she says. "Everyone in their seats."

The entire classroom watches as Ben walks across the room. He opens the cage door and slips the mouse back in. The rescued animal scurries around the cage, jumps over a

couple of other mice until it reaches a corner, and huddles there like nothing unusual has happened.

Mrs. Tibbets tells Ben to find a seat and walks over to the small teacher's desk in front of her class.

"Here, Ben!" shouts Ryan, pounding on the desk next to his. "Sit here!"

There's nowhere else to sit, so Ben slides into the vacant desk. Ryan gives him a lopsided smile. Ben looks away. He feels like he's balancing on a tightrope, trying to be nice to Ryan, but not too nice. Ben doesn't want to be mean, but the kid is too hyper to be a good friend. And Ben knows that being nice to Frankie's favorite victim will make him a target, too. It's enough to make his head hurt.

Mrs. Tibbets writes her name on the board and stands at the front of the class for a moment, waiting. It gets very quiet. Even Ryan seems to be holding still, which is a minor miracle.

"My name is Mrs. Tibbets, and I'll be teaching you science for the rest of the year. Most of you probably know I've been a teacher here at Edenboro for many years. I took a little time off, and now I'm back."

The teacher walks back to the front of her desk, taking her time. Ben sneaks another glance at her hiking boots.

"I expect you to sit in your seats the moment you come to class, whether I'm here or not." She pauses and looks around. "And please do not touch anything in the room unless you

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ask my permission. Especially animals in cages. Animals are living things and need to be treated carefully. They're not toys."

Frankie turns and looks at Ben and wags his finger. Mrs. Tibbets walks over and puts a hand on his shoulder.

"Augh!" Frankie squawks, like he's being strangled. Dennis laughs. Mrs. Tibbets glares at Frankie, then returns to the board at the front of the class. She writes down a bunch of words and asks the kids to copy them into their notebooks so they can look them up for homework. Ben wonders why she just doesn't hand out a sheet with the words on them. While the kids are writing down the words, Mrs. Tibbets patrols the aisles. When Mrs. Tibbets passes by Ben's desk, he notices that her hiking boots are a little muddy. He wonders if she walked to school or something, and he looks back over at the mice again.

Mrs. Tibbets walks down the row of desks, then turns up the next aisle. When she gets to Ben's desk again, she leans over his paper.

"I finished," Ben says. She reaches out with her wrinkled hand and jabs a short, cracked fingernail at a word on his paper. *Mrs. Kutcher has fingernail polish on her fingernails*, Ben thinks. *Not Mrs. Tibbets*. Ben looks at the word under her finger. He sees that he has accidentally left the *t* out of *nocturnal*. He already knows what the word means—something that comes out at night. He fixes the spelling.

The teacher leans over the desk a little farther and asks in a soft voice, "What is your name?"

"Ben," he says. "Ben Moroney." Mrs. Tibbets's sweater doesn't smell like school. It smells like the outdoors. Like wood smoke and fresh air.

"Good," she says, looking right at him. The lines around her eyes and mouth turn down a little, making her look sad. "Ben, please don't touch those mice again. Do you understand me?"

Ben feels his face get hot. He nods, but he wants to defend himself, too. "I've taken care of mice before," he mutters. "I know about them."

"They're not pets," she says.

"I know how to hold them," Ben says, but Mrs. Tibbets has already straightened up and is starting to walk away.

"If they're not pets, what are they for?" Ben asks a little louder, and a couple of kids turn around and look back at him.

Mrs. Tibbets looks back at him, too, her eyebrows raised. Ben can feel that's he's pushing it a little, but he wants to know.

"Are they for bait, or food, or maybe for an experiment? I know someone who feeds mice to snakes. Is it something like that?" he asks. Now everybody is watching Mrs. Tibbets to see how she's going to react.

Ben waits for her to get mad. But she doesn't. Her lips

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scrunch up, almost like she's trying not to smile. "Go over the words one more time, Ben," she says. "I brought the mice in to show the second graders. And we're not talking about snakes today. Maybe some other day."

Mrs. Tibbets goes back to the front of the room and begins to talk about the differences between warm-blooded and cold-blooded animals. Ben is only half listening—he already knows all that. But he hears a word that makes his heart skip a beat in his chest.

"Snakes."

He looks back at the mice again and then up at Mrs. Tibbets, with her gray hair and cracked fingernails and baggy sweater.

And hiking boots.