opening extract from

Mrs Frisby and the Rats of NIMH

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published by

Penguin Books Ltd

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The Sickness of Timothy Frisby

Mrs Frisby, the head of a family of field mice, lived in an underground house in the vegetable garden of a farmer named Mr Fitzgibbon. It was a winter house, such as some field mice move to when food becomes too scarce, and the living too hard in the woods and pastures. In the soft earth of a bean, potato, pea and asparagus patch there is plenty of food left over for mice after the human crop has been gathered.

Mrs Frisby and her family were especially lucky in the house itself. It was a slightly damaged cement block, the hollow kind with two oval holes through it;

it had somehow been abandoned in the garden during the summer and lay almost completely buried, with only a bit of one corner showing above ground, which is how Mrs Frisby had discovered it. It lay on its side in such a way that the solid parts of the block formed a roof and a floor, both waterproof, and the hollows made two spacious rooms. Lined with bits of leaves, grass, cloth, cotton fluff, feathers and other soft things Mrs Frisby and her children had collected, the house stayed dry, warm and comfortable all winter. A tunnel to the surface-earth of the garden, dug so that it was slightly larger than a mouse and slightly smaller than a cat's foreleg, provided access, air, and even a fair amount of light to the living room. The bedroom, formed by the second oval, was warm but dark, even at midday. A short tunnel through the earth behind the block connected the two rooms.

Although she was a widow (her husband had died only the preceding summer), Mrs Frisby was able, through luck and hard work, to keep her family – there were four children – happy and well fed. January and February were the hardest months; the sharp, hard cold that began in December lasted until March, and by February the beans and peas had been picked over (with help from the birds), the asparagus roots were frozen into stone, and the potatoes had been thawed and refrozen so many times they had acquired a slimy structure and a rancid taste. Still, the Frisbys made the best of what there was, and one way or another they kept from being hungry.

Then, one day at the very end of February, Mrs Frisby's younger son, Timothy, fell sick.

That day began with a dry, bright, icy morning. Mrs Frisby woke up early, as she always did. She and her family slept close together in a bed of down, fluff, and bits of cloth they had gathered, warm as a ball of fur.

She stood up carefully so as not to awaken the children, and walked quietly through the short tunnel to the living room. Here it was not so warm, but not really cold either. She could see from the light filtering down the entrance tunnel that the sun was up, and bright. She looked at the food in her pantry, a hollowed-out space lined with small stones in the earth behind the living room. There was plenty of food for breakfast, and lunch and dinner, too, for that matter; but still the sight depressed her, for it was the same tiresome fare they had been eating every day, every meal, for the last month. She wished she knew where to find a bit of green lettuce, or a small egg, or a taste of cheese, or a muffin. There were eggs in plenty not far off, in the hen-house. But hens and hens' eggs are too big for a field mouse to cope with; and besides, between the garden and the hen-house there was a wide sward of shrubs and grass, some of it grown up quite tall. Cat territory.

She climbed up the tunnel, emerging whiskers first, and looked around warily. The air was sharp, and there was white frost thick on the ground and on the dead leaves at the edge of the wood across the garden patch.

Mrs Frisby set off over the gently furrowed earth, and when she reached the fence, she turned right, skirting the border of the forest, searching with her bright round eyes for a bit of carrot, a frozen parsnip, or something green. But there was nothing green at that time of year but the needles on the pine trees and the leaves on the holly, neither of which a mouse – or any other animal, for that matter – can eat.

And then, straight in front of her, she did see something green. She had reached the far corner of the garden, and there, at the edge of the woods where it met the fence, was a stump. In the stump there was a hole, and out of the hole protruded something that looked a little like a leaf, but was not.

Mrs Frisby had no trouble at all going through the wire fence, but she approached the hole cautiously. If the stump was hollow, as it seemed to be, there was no telling who or what might be living in it.

A foot or so from the hole she stopped, stood still, and watched and listened. She could hear no sound, but from there she could see what the green was. It was, in fact, a yellowish-brownish-green: a bit of a sweet corn husk. But what was a sweet corn husk doing there? The cornfield was in a different part of the farm altogether, away beyond the pasture. Mrs Frisby hopped closer and then, carefully, crept up the side of the stump and peered inside. When her eyes got used to the dark, she saw that she had found a treasure: a winter's supply of food, carefully stored and then, for some reason, forgotten or abandoned.

But stored by whom? A racoon perhaps? Not very likely, so far from the stream. More likely a squirrel or a ground hog. She knew that both of these felt free to help themselves to the new corn each year, and that they were strong enough to carry ears away and store them.

But whoever had done it, why had he then abandoned the store? And then she remembered. Back in November there had come from near that edge of the woods the sound that sends all of the animals in the forest shivering to their hiding places – the sound of hunters' guns shooting, the sound that is accompanied, for someone, by a fiery stabbing pain. And then he never needs his stored food again.

Still, since Mrs Frisby did not even know what kind of animal it had been, much less his name, she could not shed many tears over him – and food was food. It was not the green lettuce she had longed for, but she and her children were extremely fond of corn, and there were eight large ears in the stump, a noble supply for a mouse family. Down under the corn she also could see a pile of fresh peanuts (from still another part of the farm), some hickory nuts, and a stack of dried, sweet-smelling mushrooms.

With her forepaws and sharp teeth she pulled off a part of the husk from the top ear of corn and folded it double to serve as a crude carrying bag. Then she pulled loose as many of the yellow kernels as she could easily lift, and putting them in the husk-bag she hopped off briskly for home. She would come back for more after breakfast and bring the children to help.

She backed down the tunnel entrance to her house tail first, pulling the corn after her and calling cheerfully as she went:

'Children! Wake up! See what I have for breakfast. A surprise!'

They came hurrying out, rubbing their eyes in excitement, for any kind of surprise in food was a rare and festive thing in the cold dead of winter. Teresa, the oldest, came first; crowding close behind her was Martin, the biggest, a strong, quick mouse, dark-haired and handsome like his poor father. Then came Cynthia, the youngest, a slim, pretty girl-mouse, light-haired and, in fact, a little light-headed as well, and over-fond of dancing.

'Where is it?' she said. 'What is it? Where's the surprise?'

'Where is Timothy?' asked Mrs Frisby.

'Mother,' said Teresa, concerned, 'he says he's sick and can't get up.'

'Nonsense. Martin, tell your brother to get out of bed at once, or he'll get no breakfast.'

Martin ran to the bedroom obediently but came back in a moment alone.

'He says he feels too sick, and he doesn't want any breakfast, even a surprise. I felt his forehead, and it's burning hot.'

'Oh, dear,' said Mrs Frisby. 'That sounds as if he really is sick.' Timothy had, on occasion, been known to think he was sick when he really was not. 'Here, you may all have your breakfast – save Timothy's – and I'll go up and see what's wrong.'

She opened up the green carrying bag and put the corn on the table, dividing it into five equal shares. The dining table was a smooth piece of lath supported on both ends by stones.

'Corn!' shouted Martin. 'Oh, Mother. Where did you ever get it?'

'Eat up,' said Mrs Frisby, 'and a little later I'll show you, because there's a lot more where this came from.' And she disappeared into the little hallway that led to the bedroom.

'A lot more,' Martin repeated as he sat down with his two sisters. 'That sounds like enough to last till moving day.'

'I hope so,' Cynthia said. 'When is moving day, anyway?'

'Two weeks,' said Martin authoritatively. 'Maybe three.'

'Oh, Martin, how do you know?' protested Teresa. 'What if it stays cold? Anyway, suppose Timothy isn't well enough?'

At this dreadful thought, so casually raised, they all grew worried and fell silent. Then Cynthia said:

'Teresa, you shouldn't be so gloomy. Of course he'll be well. He's just got a cold. That's all.' She finished eating her corn, and so did the others.

In the bedroom Mrs Frisby felt Timothy's forehead. It was indeed hot, and damp with sweat. She took his pulse and dropped his wrist in alarm at what she felt.

'Do you feel sick in your stomach?'

'No, Mother. I feel all right, only cold, and when I sit up I get dizzy. And I can't get my breath too well.'

Mrs Frisby peered anxiously at his face, and would have looked at his tongue, but in the dark room she could see no more than the dim outline of his head. He was the thinnest of her children and had a dark complexion like his father and brother. He was narrow of face; his eyes were unusually large and bright, and shone with the intensity of his thought when he spoke. He was, Mrs Frisby knew, the smartest and most thoughtful of her children, though she would never have admitted this aloud. But he was also the frailest, and when colds or flu or virus infections came around he was the first to catch them and the slowest to recover. He was also – perhaps as a result – something of a hypochondriac. But there was no doubt he was really sick this time. His head felt as if he had a high fever, and his pulse was very fast.

'Poor Timothy. Lie back down and keep covered.' She spread over him some of the bits of cloth they used as blankets. 'After a while we'll fix you a pallet in the living room so you can lie out where it's light. I've found a fine supply of corn this morning, more than we can eat for the rest of the winter. Would you like some?'

'No, thank you. I'm not hungry. Not now.'

He closed his eyes, and in a few minutes he went to sleep. But it was a restless sleep in which he tossed and moaned continually.

In mid-morning Mrs Frisby, Martin, and Cynthia set off for the stump to carry home some more of the corn, and some peanuts and mushrooms (the hickory

nuts they would leave, for they were too hard for mouse jaws to crack, and too tedious to gnaw through). They left Teresa at home to look after Timothy, whom they had wrapped up and helped into a temporary sickbed in the living room. When they returned at lunchtime, carrying heavy loads of food, they found her near tears from worry.

Timothy was much worse. His eyes looked wild and strange from the fever; he trembled continuously, and each breath he took sounded like a gasp for life.

Teresa said: 'Oh, Mother, I'm so glad you're back. He's been having nightmares and shouting about monsters and cats; and when I talk to him, he doesn't hear me at all.'

Not only was Timothy not hearing with his ears; his eyes, though wide open, were not seeing, or if they were, he was not recognizing what they saw. When his mother tried to talk to him, to hold his hand and ask him how he felt, he stared past her as if she did not exist. Then he gave out a long, low moan and seemed to be trying to say something, but the words would not form properly and made no sense at all.

The other children stared in frightened silence. Finally Martin asked:

'Mother, what is it? What's wrong with him?'

'He is terribly ill. His fever is so high he has become delirious. There is nothing for it – I will have to go and see Mr Ages. Timothy must have medicine.'

Mr Ages

Mr Ages was a white mouse who lived across the farm and beyond, in a house that was part of a brick wall. The wall lined the basement of what had once been a large farmhouse. The farmhouse itself had burned down so many years ago that nobody could remember what it had looked like nor who had lived there. The basement remained, a great square hole in the ground; and in its crumbling walls, protected from the wind and snow, numerous small creatures lived. In summer there were snakes, dangerous to Mrs Frisby, but there was no need to worry about them in winter.