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Opening extract from

Tumtum and Nutmeg

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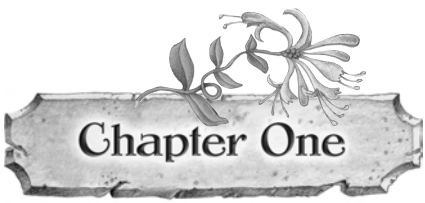
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Once there were two married mice called Mr and Mrs Nutmouse, and they lived in great style. They had a big, rambling house with a ballroom, and a billiards room, and a banqueting room, and a butler's room, and just about every other sort of room a married couple might want. (There were thirty-six rooms in all.)

The house was called Nutmouse Hall, and it

was situated in the broom cupboard of a small human dwelling called Rose Cottage. A broom cupboard might not sound a very grand place for a house, but this broom cupboard was special. It had creamy white walls, and mottled red tiles on the floor, and a tiny sash window hidden behind a curtain of honeysuckle.

But the nicest thing of all about the broom cupboard was that no human knew it was there. This is because, a very long time ago, soon after Rose Cottage was built, someone pushed a big Welsh dresser against the kitchen wall, hiding the broom cupboard door from view; and the dresser always stayed there, because there was nowhere else to put it.

It was Mr Nutmouse's great-great-great-

grandfather who first discovered the broom cupboard, when he crept beneath the dresser, and poked his nose under the door. The red tiles and the white walls looked so appealing that he decided to build a house there straight away; and the first thing he had to do was to build a big round mouse-hole so that his workmen could get in and out with all their bricks and cement-mixers. Then he fitted the mouse-hole with smart iron gates, and as soon as a mouse entered those gates he was on the Nutmouse family's territory.

Nutmouse Hall was built in the middle of the broom cupboard, and it was considered a very fine piece of architecture. The walls were made of pretty pebblestone, and there were gables on the windows and little turrets peeking out of the roof. The front

of the house faced south, so the bedroom windows caught the sun as it filtered through the honeysuckle. The smallest rooms, such as the bathrooms, were the size of a cake-tin, while the ballroom was the size of a hamper. (And a hamper-sized room seemed very big to the Nutmouses, since they were only two inches long.)

Because Nutmouse Hall was so enormous, Mr and Mrs Nutmouse did not use all the rooms available to them. Mr Nutmouse spent most of the time in his library, warming his toes in front of the fire, and Mrs Nutmouse spent most of her time scurrying about in her kitchen, making delicious things to eat.

Mr and Mrs Nutmouse had been married a long time, but they still called each other by the

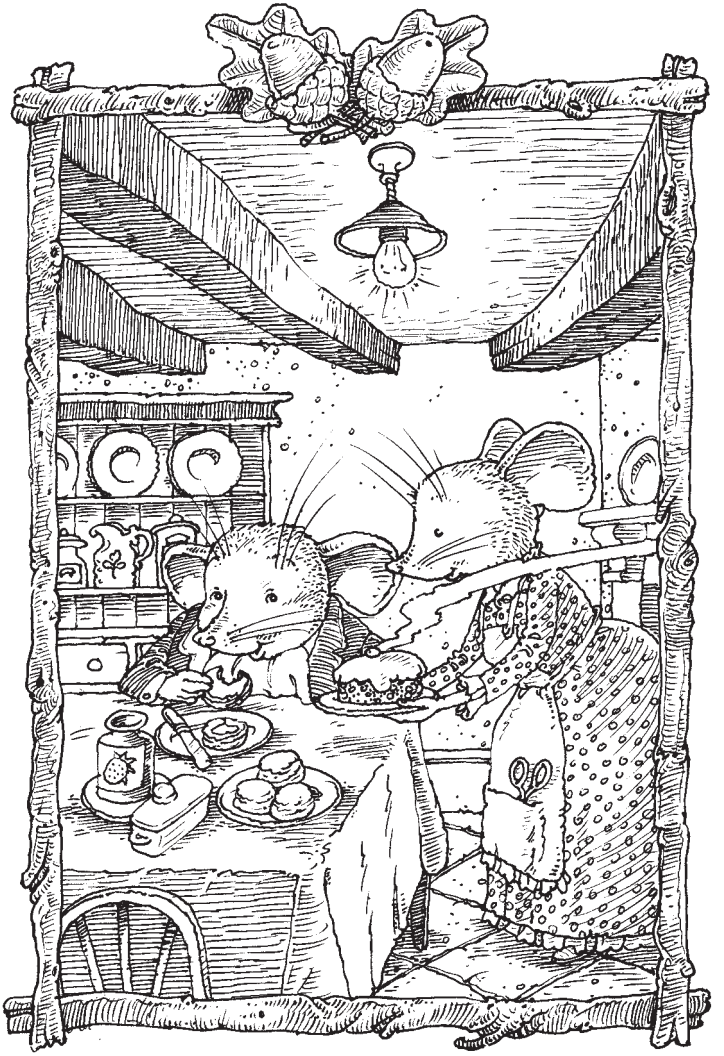
affectionate pet names they had adopted during their engagement. Mrs Nutmouse called Mr Nutmouse Tumtum, because he had such a large one, and Mr Nutmouse called Mrs Nutmouse Nutmeg, because she had nutmeg hair. (Mr Nutmouse thought this was very exotic, because his family had all been greys.)

In their funny way, the Nutmouses were well-suited to each other. Mr Nutmouse was a wise, bookish sort of mouse. He never lost his temper or got agitated, and he did everything very calmly and slowly. Mrs Nutmouse was quite the opposite. She did everything very fast, and even little tasks, such as putting the icing on a cake, could get her into a terrible dither. But in her hasty way she was surprisingly efficient. The house was spick and span,

the bills were paid on time, and the food served at Nutmouse Hall was the envy of all the mice for miles around.

Mrs Nutmouse looked upon every meal as a celebration. For breakfast there would be eggs and bacon and toast and marmalade; lunch was all manner of cold meats and salads; for tea there was always a homemade cake or scone; and supper would be a delicacy, such as earwigs *en croute*. Mrs Nutmouse had a whole shelf of cookery books, so she was never short of inspiration.

Mr Nutmouse was not as rich as his ancestors had been, and this was because he gave most of his money away. He supported all sorts of charities – charities for homeless mice, charities for arthritic mice, charities for illiterate mice, charities for bald



mice . . . he even supported a charity for mice with hiccups. So one way or another the Nutmouses did not have much money left. They did not employ a butler or a maid; and they could not afford to give banquets in their banqueting room, nor balls in their ballroom.

But since neither of them much liked balls and banquets, they didn't mind a bit; and Mrs Nutmouse was such a good housekeeper that life was splendid all the same.

But beyond the broom cupboard, where the humans lived, things were not splendid at all. Rose Cottage was owned by Mr Mildew, a widower who lived there with his two children, Arthur and Lucy. They were very poor, and they did not have nearly

so many rooms as the Nutmouses had. There was one bathroom, which was only a little bit bigger than the bath, and Arthur and Lucy shared a tiny bedroom in the attic with a ceiling that leaked.

From the outside, Rose Cottage looked very inviting. The garden was full of pear trees and wild flowers, and the honeysuckle trailed all over the stone walls, and curled along the fat fringe of the thatch. But inside it was less agreeable. Every room was rife with clutter and chaos, the walls were damp, and the plaster was beginning to crumble. The beams in the sitting room were full of woodworm, and the carpets were so threadbare you could see through to the floorboards, which were full of woodworm too. The boiler had packed up long ago, and in winter the wind howled into

the kitchen through the cracks in the garden door.

The cottage had been much better cared for when Mrs Mildew was alive, but she had died long ago, when Arthur was still a baby. He couldn't remember his mother at all, and Lucy could only remember her lying in bed looking very thin and white, with a fat doctor standing over her. Lucy had been told the name of her mother's illness once, but it had been much too peculiar a word for her to remember.

The Mildew children did not miss having a mother, because they couldn't remember what having one had been like. And yet they knew that there were certain disadvantages to being without one, and they considered living in chaos to be among them.