

from *Mice 1961, a novel*



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The story of the two sisters was minted when the world's air was fresh. Many versions exist. In some, the events are barbed and hot, confused as life really is. The siblings struggle. In one variation, the two argue and fight beside a mill's cold stream. The younger one falls and drowns, but once dead, grows wings. In another version, the dead one transforms into a harp who sings.

Some follow widely-venerated plot patterns. Some stories reveal themselves mildly and weakheartedly in the face of life; some emphasize the sisters' beautifully curious, humid faces and young, swaying gaits. Other versions portray the girls as otherworldly, and the sound of their speech so striking it resounds in other stories nearby. One variation has it that the girls part in blinding rain, reuniting only after many adventures that, though invented, are true.

Some stories are dense as pudding with a set skin, no further words possible to add, none to omit.

It could start with an immediate climax in which those in power are held down and stabbed.

So many stories sprint callowly to perfunctory and false endings, tidy, uplifting, and untrue.

If told through a different lens, would it fall apart?

Often, one sister becomes more prominent in the plot, resembling other centrally figured girls, like the weakish-type movie-star: she's blonde. Girdled inside a film's frames or candied for TV, she is nervous and ever-alert, for the plot watches her obsessively, as if through a microscope. Her appetite is not for herself. She isn't hearty and has no overbite or lisp; she can't wear bulky oxford shoes.

Why, anyway, did the older sister force Mice to wear those awful, clumsy, brad-covered shoes?

A story should set out to convince the listener there's no other way.

Perhaps it's best to tell my version of Mice in a long, clenched series of asides.

Although to describe is to contaminate, I began my try.

Face it, Mice's eyes were simply not right.

Neighbors said her out-of-date blouses, oaf shoes, and the bottomless absence of tint in her skin made her a shadow in reverse—a white elephant or a ghost, they said. Those weak, wobbly eyes were the worst.

Her startling-white appearance, the result of a one-in-twenty thousand chromosomal disorder, had been a lifelong disaster for the sisters' mother Candy, who'd endured the girl's growing-up years mostly in bed, full of shame.

Now Candy was gone and Mice scuttled along the sidewalks every evening. After being cooped up through the days, it must've been a release. Neighbors gathered routinely at Parrott's Grocery near 74th or in front of Gorge Discount to watch.

Some felt sorry for running Mice, with her excessive whiteness. They wondered aloud: Is that longish white down on her limbs a sign that her life is hard, or that all of life is? Had the down emerged because of Candy? As she sped past the porch-lounging neighbors near sunset, they pointed out her tiny teeth and forehead spattered with pinprick freckles, taking care to note that Mice, whenever she coughed, turned both scarlet and blue.

"Those eyebrows!" they remarked as she passed.

At times, neighbors spoke my most atrocious thoughts so precisely.

They said the girl's thick frost eyebrows turned their stomachs; they took offense at her fuzzy, half-airborne, colorless hair, complaining that Mice ruined the neighborhood with her head and body, blinding everyone with her terrible all-whiteness to boot.

Face it, even if her older, longsuffering sister Jody had coiffed, straightened, and treated the younger girl's awful, marled-yellowish undertracts of hair and dressed her in silky sleeveless blouses, too, neighbors would've disapproved.

And face it, some neighbors maligned Mice for not being pristinely white enough, complaining that her shade, that of dullish sour cream, should be brighter.

The milkscape of the girl's neck and shoulders made them lazy and liable to shout uncontrolled remarks, they said. From the porch at Parrotts, they spoke routinely against those indistinct, twitching eyes that couldn't even function in bright sun, and they grew irate over the paintbrush-like eyelashes, too, not to mention the lashes' jarring cream-orange tips, which, whenever the girl removed her oversized sunglasses, threw neighbors into rages.

Waking and congregating earlier every day, neighbors, it seemed, had a thirst, either for the girl or for dismissing her; wasn't it so unlucky, they said, that Mice'd been born as she was and with such poor luck besides, only to be larded with problems nobody ever had heard of or understood? In addition, the language lacked words to describe Mice thoroughly.

Once, I heard Al Parrott tell the morning clutch of neighbor-customers on the porch that Mice's growing-up problems eventually had worsened to completely obscure her sight in the way seeping oil slowly ruins good wood. Other neighbors, fully confined to their points of view, told various stories of Mice while explaining that, for them, the merest mention of the girl sent immediate thrills of gratitude through them for whatever degree of vision they actually possessed.

So, because of Mice, neighbors grew more sure of themselves. They slept better each night.

Watching her speeding furtively at dusk past the storefronts' ruby bricks, riling up the dust up so it coated her hands and arms, or spying her while she sat on the apartment stairs at night without even a handkerchief beneath her and furiously stripping down radios, they complained that Mice was too tiny or large, or simply

bothersome with her padded hands and outer ears so peel-thin and devoid of the folds that normally characterize others' ear-tops. Neighbors also disliked Mice, they said, because of her habit of asking abrupt, off-topic questions, not to mention the fact that her eyes were small and blue, twitching under duress and at most other times, too.

They couldn't agree, either, as to what Mice actually looked like or what she was doing on Reef Way. Some thought she could see fairly well at close range, but not across any distance; others said her eyes were overall adequate but her biggest defects were her offputting all-whiteness, animal laziness, and selfishness. Some swore she was stone blind, and in the end, no one really knew what Mice could or couldn't see.

As I lay in my place behind the lint-colored sofa, I studied her often as she sat emptily at her hobby table, touching her wooden boxes of radio parts, the peppery freckles across her nose and cheeks a little mask of runes that made me wonder: Are patterns, by the fact of their existence, asking to be observed and deciphered, or do they just blindly occur?

What color were Mice's small, flat hands anyway? Strawberry-pink.