

The Midsummer Mouse

From: *The Midsummer Mouse: midsummer tales of Tiptoes Lightly and the Summer Queen*

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Once upon a time, there was a mouse. She was born in the middle of winter. In fact, she was born on the darkest day of the year when the sun only comes out of its house for the shortest while. She had lots of brothers and sisters, all as squiggly and squirmy as baby mice should be, but this little mouse was different. She was different because the tip of her tail was golden. And it didn't just look like gold, it didn't just have the color of gold, the tip of her tail was really real gold.

As the little mouse grew, more and more of her tail turned to gold. O, she looked so pretty in springtime when all the blossoms were on the trees, for by then her whole tail was golden and it sparkled and shone in the sunlight.

Slowly the days grew longer as summer drew near. The little mouse was still growing, and her brothers and sisters were growing too, but as the days lengthened the fur along her back turned to gold, then her sides, then her feet, and finally her ears and head and whiskers turned to gold. At last, just before Midsummer's Day, the little mouse was full grown and all of her had turned to gold—all except her eyes, they were still dark and let in the light.

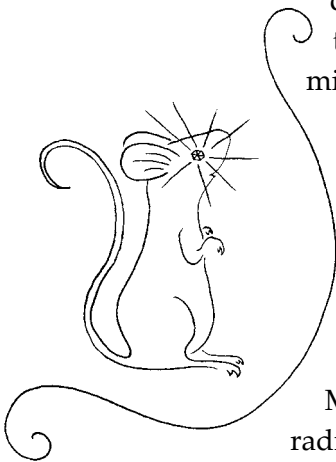
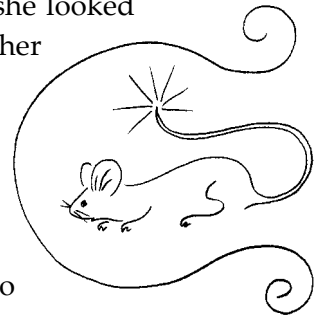
Then she did a strange thing, something that had never been done before. She collected branches in the forest and made a pile in the meadow where she lived. On Midsummer's Eve she called all the mice to her, and when it was dark she lit the wood pile with the tip of her tail. O, how lovely it was to see the bonfire burning merrily, and the mice danced round and round the flames.

At midnight, just as the bonfire was at its brightest, the little mouse let out a cry. They gathered round to see what had happened and saw that her eyes had turned to diamonds.

'I am blind,' she said. 'My eyes are filled with light.'

The mice looked and saw that what she said was true. And whoever looked into her eyes, whoever saw the golden light streaming out of her diamond eyes, was changed completely. For the whole of the next day, Midsummer's Day, the golden mouse was blind, and the most wonderful, radiant light shone from her eyes. After that they called her the Midsummer Mouse.

The day after Midsummer's Day her eyes went back to normal and she could see. Slowly, bit by bit, the Midsummer Mouse lost her golden sheen. First her whiskers, then her head, and her ears and legs and sides and back and bit by bit her tail lost its gold until, on her birthday, the darkest day of the year, only the tip of her tail was golden. Then slowly, as the sun strengthened in the new year, she turned golden again until Midsummer's Eve.





This went on for years and years, and the Midsummer Mouse never grew old. Now, everyone gathered wood for the bonfire at Midsummer's Eve and it became a great celebration. When darkness fell she lit the pile with her tail, and danced all golden and shining around the fire with her brothers and sisters. At midnight she went blind, and the light from her eyes changed all who looked into them.

After a few years the mice began to celebrate midwinter too. The shortest day they called The Tail of the Year, and everyone painted the tips of their tails yellow so they'd look like the Midsummer Mouse.

One day, when spring was in full bloom, a raven came and sat in a tree.

'Caw-caw,' said the raven. 'Caw!'

The mice paid no attention, but the Midsummer Mouse felt cold and afraid. She tried to hide, but her tail glinted and sparkled in the sunlight. The raven spied her easily. He saw her precious tail shining golden in the green grass.

'Caw-caw-caw!' he croaked. He swooped down and grabbed the Midsummer Mouse and flew away.

The raven traveled for many miles, over great lands and terrible wastes. At last he came to a mountain and entered a cave. Down, down, deep down into the earth he flew, and the darkness and gloom grew deeper. He came to a great hall and there he changed into a dark king and kept the Midsummer Mouse in a cage made of stone.

Oh, the dark king's hall was gloomy, gloomier than the darkest night, but the Midsummer Mouse's tail glowed with a golden light and it lit her small cage. And day after day, week after week, the gold on the Midsummer Mouse grew and grew until the whole cavern filled with light.

Far above her head the mice ran about in confusion. They didn't know what to do without the Midsummer Mouse. The days were gloomy, the sunlight weak and dim, and all creation lost its sheen and beauty. They built the wood pile for Midsummer's Eve, but no one could light it. No matter how hard they tried the wood refused to burn. There was no dancing, and no merriment, and no joy, and the mouse people were sad.

For six long years the dark king kept the Midsummer Mouse in her cage. Her light waxed and waned with the course of the year, and the dark king often changed into a raven and went flying around his great caverns crying, 'Caw-caw-caw!' when her light was brightest.

In the seventh year, the Midsummer Mouse begged to be let out of her cage.

'I have been here so long,' she cried. 'My legs are growing weak and my strength dims. Let me out or I will die. I cannot run far away.'

The dark king let the Midsummer Mouse out of her cage and allowed her to run around. He kept a sharp eye on her, but she never went far and he soon got used to her wandering about his cavern.

'Oh, Dark Lord,' she said to him one day, 'I am cold when I sleep. Give me a blanket for comfort.'



So the dark king gave her a blanket of blackest feathers. From then on, every night she covered herself with the blanket of feathers and slept far longer than she ever did before. She seemed so much happier now and the dark king was pleased. She even began to collect colorful pebbles and place them about her cage to make it beautiful.

As the seventh year wore on, the Midsummer Mouse grew brighter and brighter. When her tail was completely golden it was spring upon the earth. When her back and legs shone bright she knew the sun was climbing into the heights. But the Midsummer Mouse never said much to the dark king. She just ran about the caverns looking for pretty stones, and at night she slept in her cage with her blanket of darkest feathers covering her over. Now the dark king did not even close her door because she did it herself, and he forgot that he ever locked it.

By now the Midsummer Mouse's body was glowing brightly and the dark king delighted to see her run about his cavern shining with golden light. Her ears glowed golden, then her head, and then her nose. One day only her whiskers and eyes were not made of gold. That night she went into her cage, closed the door, covered herself with the blanket of feathers and pretended to fall asleep. She waited. She waited until the dark king dozed on his throne. Then she gathered the pebbles she had collected and made them into a pile. She covered the pile with the blanket of feathers, opened the door, and fled out of the cavern.

Oh, how the Midsummer Mouse ran! She ran as she had never run before. Up and up and up the long and dreary caverns she climbed until she came out into the world once more. Off she set, running and running, for she knew she hadn't much time.

Down below, the dark king noticed nothing. He saw the Midsummer Mouse sleeping in her cage, covered with the warm blanket of feathers. But when midday came he began to get restless.

'Why is that mouse still sleeping?' he said to himself. 'That blanket of feathers is too warm. It lets her sleep in too much comfort.'

But he left her alone.

'Why is that mouse still sleeping?' he grumbled when the afternoon wore on. 'She should be running around and lighting the cavern for my pleasure.'

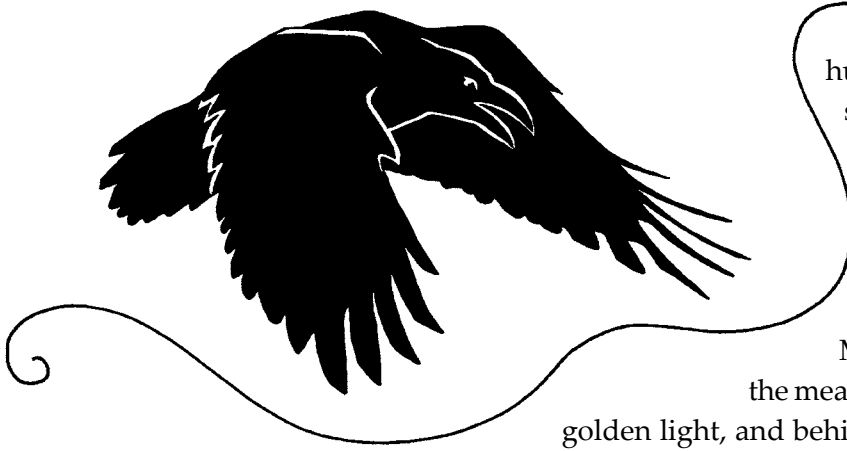
But he left her alone for a while longer.

When evening came the dark king grew angry. 'She has no right to stay asleep all day. I am the lord of the underworld and she must serve me!' and he went to the cage of stone, opened the door and lifted the blanket of feathers. Instead of the Midsummer Mouse he found only a pile of pebbles.

'Caw-caw-caw,' he cried angrily, instantly turning into a great raven. Through the caverns he flew, up through the long and twisted hallways, out through the cave in the side of the mountain and into the world. Already the sun was setting on Midsummer's Eve. Already the clouds were as red as blood. Already the time was short. With a great cry the dark raven took to the air, following the trail of the Midsummer Mouse.

Night had fallen when the Midsummer Mouse came to her country. Soon it would be midnight and already she could feel her eyes growing dim. She ran over the hills and valleys and found her home with its big tree and its large, grassy meadow. In the meadow a pile of wood was standing. It was huge, for the mice had added to it each year in the hopes that it would burn. All about were





hundreds of mice, waiting patiently as someone tried to light the pile. But the wood refused to burn. No matter how hard they tried it would not burn. Even the driest kindling wouldn't catch fire.

Suddenly they saw the Midsummer Mouse running across the meadow. She was glowing with a brilliant, golden light, and behind her was the raven, his dark wings flapping furiously.

'Caw-caw-caw!' he croaked as he plunged towards her. 'Caw-caw-caw!'

'Run, Midsummer Mouse! Run!' cried all the mice.

She ran, and at midnight, just as she turned blind, the Midsummer Mouse leaped into the great pile of wood and the wood burst into flame.

'Caw-caw-caw!' cried the raven, swerving to avoid the flames.

'Caw-caw-caw!' he cried, flying round and round the fire. Soon the flames were so fierce and bright that his eyes were blinded and his wings began to burn.

'Caw-caw-caw!' cried the raven in anger, and turning away, he flew back to his dark caverns.

The mice didn't know what to do. Where was the Midsummer Mouse? They stayed around the fire all night, talking about her and wondering where she was. In the morning the bonfire was completely burned out and she was nowhere to be seen. All that remained was a great pile of ashes. Only then did they go home.

Later that day a wind blew up. It swirled in the treetops and raced across the meadow and lifted the ashes and blew them away. When the wind had gone, the mice went to where the bonfire had been. In the middle they found a small golden mouse with diamond eyes. One of them picked it up and showed it to everyone else, and whoever looked into those shining eyes was changed completely.

