



## One

*But Mousie, you are not alone,  
In proving foresight may be vain;  
The best-laid schemes of mice and men  
often go askew,  
And leave us nothing but grief and pain,  
For what was promised joy.*

—Robert Burns

**I**n the fall of 1980, multicolored leg warmers pulled over Chic jeans, long Farrah Fawcett hair blow-dried into wings, I sauntered onto the campus of a fancy-pants New England college. It could have been any of a number of ivy-encumbered, institutionally self-satisfied universi-

ties; it just happened to be the one that admitted me. I arrived to the strains of the Clash, the Ramones, the Pretenders, and Blondie—“*We live for love, we live for love*”—blasting from panes of leaded glass cranked wide. I came trailing a faint scent of Windsong with a top note of equal parts bravado and insecurity. I’d left behind a set of less motivated friends who thought it odd I spent so much time reading what was not required; a mother with whom I shared clothes and secrets; a cold and calculating father; the pesky presence that was my younger brother; two cats, Ishtar and Daedalus; and Barkus—governess, playmate, sibling. It was hardest to leave Barkus.

She had been the shelter in my stormy adolescence. To her alone I’d confessed my unspeakable fears—not smart enough, not pretty enough, wrong clothes, bad hair, oily skin, too loud, too harsh, too judgmental. I measured myself against the standards of teenaged perfection and, like most girls my age, found myself lacking in every single realm. But no matter how hard I was on myself, Barkus was always right there by my side.

Along with many of my fellow students, my guidance counselor had told me that I didn’t have a chance of getting into the college I was now attending. I left my rural public high school in upstate New York, a place where football players were gods, to go to a college where the big men on campus sang a cappella in groups with silly names and the pigskin throwers were spurned and scorned. I put away my childish things—blue eye shadow, curling iron, artfully ripped off-the-shoulder sweatshirt and the Top-Siders I’d bought before going off to school (on the advice of the just-published *Preppy Handbook*)—when I discovered that real preppies eschewed makeup and wore legitimately ripped and torn Levi’s, ancient hole-ridden cashmere sweaters, and their grandfather’s overcoats.

Like a medieval cathedral, our college was designed to make you feel small. When you’re eighteen years old and standing among vaulted arches, pointy towers, and ancient-looking gray stone, and you think you’re there because someone made a mistake in accepting your application, and that everyone is smarter and more sophisticated than you, and you’re positive they could and would be happy to

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point out exactly the ways in which you are deficient, well, you end up feeling kind of small. You step onto those ivied, ivory grounds, drink in the culture, and, like Alice down the rabbit hole, you “shut up like a telescope,” folding in on yourself, getting smaller and smaller.

But what a place to learn. My new friends and I pored over the course catalog and salivated, tempted by the smorgasbord of classes we could take. We were Intellectuals. Or at least, we were intellectual groupies. And now, here, accepted, admitted, it was, unlike high school, finally cool to be smart. We reveled in sharing newfound knowledge, loved learning from each other as much as we lionized our professors.

My world opened and expanded in ways that would have shocked—and thrilled—my high-school self. One day I’m hanging out at the Dairy Queen with a mouth-breathing wrestler I’ve known since second grade, and the next I’m taking a course on a topic whose name I can’t pronounce with people from countries I’ve never heard of. Talking about the vagaries of gnosticism would be unthinkable with the kids in my twelfth-grade homeroom; less than a year later I found myself in a late-night dorm huddle, discussing with glee the “ineluctable modality of the visible” and sharing a collective fantasy of turning *Paradise Lost* into a Saturday morning cartoon. We may have been dorks, but we were dorking out together. To be in a place where you recognize others of your ilk is a gift.

One of the best things about college is that you have an unheralded chance to log hours getting to know your friends. At no other time are you so intimately involved in the lives of people you meet; in college you live, work, play, eat, drink, and sleep together. Without the responsibilities and obligations that come later in adult life, you have the capital to invest in friendship, an investment that grows and pays dividends over time. Your friends’ stories become your stories; what shapes them, shapes you. The act of telling these stories creates intimacy and knowledge: it is how you get to know each other and yourself.

My female friends were my touchstones. We intimidated each other in various, mostly unacknowledged ways, but we also found succor in being together. We learned each other’s quirks and habits and, for the most part, accepted them. I found a core group of easy

friends—good kids from stable middle-class families—who to this day provide me with solace and support, intellectual stim and the ability to send me into fits of pants-wetting giggles.

College also gave me a chance to flex newly emerging muscles of sexuality. In high school I'd had my share of boyfriends—earnest, kind young lads who would grow up to take over their father's farm, work in a factory, be a manager at the grocery store. I didn't like the geeky smart boys, so I let my eyes be my guide in picking men. Not wanting to go off to college a virgin, I gave it up to a power-lifting community-college student whose biceps were bigger than my waist and who was forever asking me the meaning of words I used. The whole thing took about three minutes. Is that all there is, I wanted to know?

No, I soon found out. College parties presented a veritable buffet of boys. They were attractive and smart, handpicked by the admissions office. We'd dance hot and sweaty into the night and retire to stiff and narrow dorm-room beds. I hooked up with the alcoholic son of a famous writer; a computer science major from Long Island; a prepster who told me that his father had shot himself to death the year before; a juggling, tai chi-practicing physicist; a coke-dealing coxswain; my "little brother," one year younger, assigned to me by the college so that I could show him the ropes (oh boy, did I show him); and plenty of others whose minds and bodies I vigorously embraced at the time and now cannot recall. Sometimes there was sex, though not always. Always, though, I'd leave their beds accompanied by the strains of the dawn chorus.

I didn't want a relationship; I didn't want to slumber with these boys or worse, wake up with them—that was too close. Relationships lasted from early morning until just before the sun rose. I wanted to take what I wanted and not apologize for it. I wanted to rewrite the rules of high school "good" conduct. I didn't want to give up any of the freedom I'd gained by leaving home. A brief physical connection provided an illusion of intimacy and that, absent a dog, was enough.

Sunday afternoons, my friends and I would meet up, stealing hours from our work, complaining about how much we had to do, and we'd rehash the night before. We'd tell each other that we would take only

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a fifteen-minute study break and would crouch in the manicured beauty of the school's courtyards, basking in the sun, recreating who had danced with whom, who went back to whose rooms, and how much we ate, drank, ingested. Two hours later, we'd get back to our books.

Conversations over dining hall dinners rippled from Faulkner and the Enlightenment to the soccer player with blond ringlets and beautiful calves. We ate boxes of yellow marshmallow Peeps while perusing *The Federalist Papers*, drank gallons of Tab over Janson's *History of Art*. In the tranquillity of friendship, we recollected the hurricane of emotions experienced the night before. Then we wrote papers on Wordsworth and the romantic poets.

What you don't get in college is to spend a lot of time with children, old people, or animals. You recognize what you took for granted back at home, and you start to miss it like crazy. You begin to feel atomized, intimidated, and in need of comfort. Kids who pined for formerly unappreciated younger siblings offered to babysit for professors. Those who longed for a dose of grandparently contact volunteered in nearby nursing homes. Me, I borrowed dogs.

I missed Barkus as soon as I got to college, missed having her lie with me on my bed, giving a better sense of security than a security blanket, more comfort than a comforter. Not long after I had settled in, I got a phone call from home. My father said he'd taken Barkus to the vet, and they'd discovered that her body was riddled with cancer. She was put to sleep that afternoon, he said. There was nothing to be done, he said. I didn't sleep or eat for days after that call.

A faculty member—a funny little Englishman—lived in our dorm, and with him lived his funny little dog, Sadie. She was some kind of terrier, a smaller dog than my fifty-pounder at home, but her whole body wagged when she greeted me, and she was as eager to go on walks with me as her owner was happy to have me take her. She pranced around campus on tiny paws, nails clicking crisply on the flagstone walkways. We dodged Frisbee games and students charging head-down to the library and walked and walked for hours.

For a while, I dated a graduate student named Kirk. I used him, brazenly, shamelessly, for canine contact: it was love at first sight. His dog, Bono, was an Akita, a showstopper. I would walk over to Kirk's off-campus apartment, give the man a perfunctory kiss hello, and then fall to the floor, on level with Bono, who'd run in circles, wagging his curled-up nubbin of a tail, and lick my face. Kirk would sit on the couch and watch. My amorous reunions with Bono would often go on for minutes, with Kirk no doubt wondering when his turn would come.

Borrowed finery helped, but it wasn't for daily wear. I valued my time with Sadie and Bono and had some brief—but emotion-packed—encounters with anyone who walked by with a wagging tail, but it wasn't like having a dog of my own.

By senior year, I was worn out. College life had lost its luster. I was ready for a change. I felt like I would never—could never—know enough. When you get to campus, you're told that you're the cream of the crop; after a couple of years, you end up feeling like skim milk. I was exhausted from studying so hard just to keep up. I was exhausted from being evaluated on the quickness and cleverness of dinner repartee, of talking cynically about books I hadn't read. And I was exhausted from trying always to be the best, smartest version of myself. Living for the first time in a single room, with no roommates to come home to, I wanted company. I wanted to feel less small.

A dog would help, but was logistically out of the question. I needed . . . what? I needed a pet. But what? Who could live with me in a tiny dorm room? Who wouldn't get me kicked out of school just prior to earning a degree? Who could be quiet . . . quiet as . . . as a mouse! A mouse. Growing up, my little brother had a pet mouse, Moosie, who loved having her cheek rubbed and hated men. She was a tiny, fierce creature, sweet and loving, at least to those with two X chromosomes. Small, quiet, easy to care for but with more personality than, say, a snake—the perfect dorm pet.

During winter break I went to the biology department of my town's local college and had a choice of about a bezzillion white mice.

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The professor who brought me there, a friend of the family, offered up the rodent booty and wondered if I wanted, perhaps, a handful of mice. No. Just one. He reached into a cage, pulled out one mouse by the tail, and put her in a box. I bought her a cage at the pet store that was probably in exactly the same scale to her as my dorm room was to me; instead of a long narrow bed, her space included an exercise wheel.

Naming was important. What was I to call this small creature? I tossed around various literary possibilities. I considered Virginia, after the divine Woolf, and Jane and Charlotte and Emily, whose novels rested in a nineteenth-century stack on my desk. I thought about calling her George—after Eliot, not Orwell, but it was 1984, and in our freshman “face book” anyone who didn’t send in a photo was replaced by a picture of the dystopian author. I didn’t want to burden my mouse with gender confusion. So, no, not George.

I settled on Prudence. It shouldn’t count as a virtue (though in terms of choosing a pet for my current living situation, she was a prudent choice and this was, of course, a virtue). As virtues go, though, prudence is a mousely one, just as gluttony is a silly sin. According to Blake’s proverbs, “Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by Incapacity.” In my world, Prudence was a tiny, lovely mouse courted by one who felt indeed like Incapacity incarnate. Plus, I liked that her name was longer than she.

I brought her back to school, and her cage fit nicely on my desk, in the right hand corner, nearest the bed, beside my typewriter. She could, if she wanted to, look out the window, but I was never sure how far those little eyes could see.

Prudence’s fur was soft as baby powder, talcy white. Her eyes were red beads, not unlike precious round rubies. Her ears were thin to the point of translucence, mapped lightly with delicate spidery veins. She had exquisitely tiny nails and long elegant whiskers. She was a fine-looking mouse. I thought she was beautiful. I’d wondered if a mouse could stand in for a dog, if she would satisfy my profound need for company. I didn’t wonder for long.

I’m sure there were rules against keeping pets in the dorm. But people kept far less innocuous things in their rooms—hot plates,

bongs, other non-studenty people. One group of resourceful and well-heeled hedonistic frat-boy types even installed a mail-order sauna. A pet mouse was small potatoes in terms of regulatory transgression. And besides, no one knew she was there, except for me and the people I invited into our room.

Most of my friends reacted with benign indifference to the fact that I kept a mouse as a pet; they already thought I was quirky and found this merely a confirmation. Betsy, who lived downstairs and always had food around, saved little treats for Prudence—pieces of stale bagel with traces of peanut butter, oatmeal raisin cookie crumbs, an apple core. Betsy wasn't entirely convinced that I could take care of myself, let alone another being, and she kindly wanted to make sure that my mouse didn't suffer from my lack of domesticity.

Prudence slept during the day, being nocturnal and all. She had busy nights, and I often fell asleep to the lullaby of her movements. She would spin on her wheel, running with such determination, such vigor, that it was hard to imagine what was going through her mind. Did she believe she was going to get somewhere else? Was she—oh, banish the thought—trying to escape? Maybe she was just getting her ya-yas out, running for the sheer joy of being in a physical body. Perhaps it was a game she played, changing her pace, varying the tempo. She'd often stop and sit while the wheel swayed gently back and forth. Was that reminiscent of returning to a mously maternal womb? Was she comforted by the cradle, endlessly rocking?

With equal fervor and aimlessness, I jumped on wheels of my own. I cranked out papers on Shakespeare, Whitman, Truffaut, the teleological suspension of the ethical, the categorical imperative, Communist Five-Year Plans, the Krebs cycle, the Venus of Willendorf, the temple of Luxor—I wrote at night in my room, preferring that cramped space to the hivelike scene of the library. While Prudence ran in place, my mind whirred, trying to keep up, trying to be smart enough, quick enough, good enough.

Tramping through the dark hallways, up entryways whose steps were worn down by generations of worn-down students, I would get to the door of my single room, take out my hefty key, and exhale loudly.

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Once I entered the room I would breathe deeply and sing out: “Dear Prudence, won’t you come out to play?”

My darling mouse would, of course, be sleeping and not particularly interested in coming out to play. I could rouse her, though. She’d unfurl from the little rodent ball she had made of herself. She’d look up, blinking beady red eyes, maybe use a tiny paw to clean the immaculate fur on her head, licking it first, then pulling it over her ear. Her whiskers, fine filigrees, twitching, sensing, her nose animated, agile. She’d look at me, and I’d think, Okay, it may be silly, but I cannot but love this mouse. “It’s beautiful, and so are you,” I would sing to my dear, dear Prudence, holding her close to my face. She’d sniff me, whiff my breath, nose twitching, sometimes kissing me on the lips, sometimes investigating my nostrils. I’d let her explore. I found it delightful.

She was a clean and tidy mouse, never peeing or pooping except in her cage. Whenever I was in my dorm room, I would prop open her door and let her come out to explore, or stay in, as she pleased.

I would sit at my desk, and she would run around it, checking out messy sheaves of paper, climbing alpine piles of books. “She walks in beauty like the night,” I said of her, to her. I read from Milton while she patrolled the expanse of my desk, occasionally peeking into my coffee cup or craning her neck to look down to the floor. “Space may produce new worlds,” I told her. She’d sit back, use a hind leg to scratch her neck, and then carry on about her business, whiskers twitching.

As I wrote on a cheap plastic portable Smith-Corona, Prudence liked to crawl onto the keys, chasing after my fingers as they flew quickly in fits and starts. She’d climb onto the tops of my hands, and I would stop, turning them over to palm her, at the same time looking down at the sentences peeking from the top of my typewriter and finding them wanting. I loved it when she’d interrupt my work like this. I loved that she would seek me out.

I stroked her cheek, and she would lean, exposing so much of it to my finger that eventually she’d keel over onto her side, one front paw near her face, a back foot stretched out like a ballet dancer’s.

As soon as I stopped, she'd right herself and get busy again. Prudence became my life that last semester. My biggest love affair in college was with a mouse.

It was as much a relief to leave my fancy-pants university as it had been an affirmation to be admitted. It had not been an easy four years. I was ready to go. But to where?

I had taken a seminar first semester of senior year, taught by Jane Randall, an editor from Oxford University Press, on the "art" of editing serious nonfiction. Jane was more open and accessible than any faculty member I had encountered, and she generated in me a desire and recognition of the need for guidance. I made an appointment to meet with her after class.

In the privacy of my teacher's office, I let down the veneer of arrogant self-confidence I'd worked so hard to cultivate and revealed myself to her, asked what I should do. Not one to shy away from giving advice, she suggested I try out publishing.

Second semester, I tried it. I commuted one day a week to New York City to type letters for the economics editor at Oxford. I Xeroxed. I filed. I typed. A lot. It meant getting up before the sun, when Prudence was still wheeling in her cage. Unable to afford cab fare, I tramped a large number of more-than-slightly-iffy blocks to the station, training it into Grand Central with the other working stiffs. I liked the atmosphere of the office, and I was intrigued by the idea of an industry where you read books all day. So, when, a week or two after graduation, a job opened up as assistant to Jane Randall herself, I jumped at the opportunity and accepted the position.

I arranged to sublet a spacious one-bedroom apartment in Queens. I had wanted to find a place in the middle of all the action—in the city—but everything was too expensive for someone who was yet to be making an income. Queens isn't that far from Manhattan, I reasoned.

Before embarking on my new career, my new life, I decided to treat myself, and Prudence, of course, to a week in the country. We