



Ninth Mouse

Brooke Middlebrook

Please, don't let anything happen to my hands. They're my favorite feature. If I someday stumble and fall wrist-deep into a puddle of acid, or otherwise suffer some kind of freak hand-disfiguring accident, it will be the result of my vanity.

"Piano fingers", my mother would call them, as we'd press our palms together, even as a child my fingertips nearly reaching hers. It followed that most afternoons in elementary school I spent at piano lessons, sign language classes, ballet.

If my dance instructors were unimpressed with me, they at least complimented my perfect hand form. Where some of my classmates held theirs like claws, I kept my fingers fluid as we'd been taught: pretend to ever-so-delicately hold the stem of a rose between your thumb and middle finger. Always lift the wrist. Lead with your pinkie, as though slicing a soft cake.

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The year I turned eleven, my mother's Christmas gift to me was a crystal ornament in the shape of a mouse, to commemorate my performance in the local ballet company's annual staging of

The Nutcracker. To be cast as a mouse didn't surprise me. By that age I knew where I stood in the hierarchy of dancers. I wasn't heavy, but I also wasn't hollow-boned like other girls in my class. My feet were flat, no matter how I stretched to arch them during *tendus*. I had begged to be allowed into the pointe class, the "real" ballet of dancing on tiptoe, but there are dogs trained to walk on their hind legs that look more natural than I did trying to mince across the floor on pointe. It would be flats for me, perfect for scurrying. When I picked up my costume, I saw that my hands would be stuffed in gray felt mittens.

My dream role was to be one of the children. The girls wore pretty dresses and had their hair curled into sausage ringlets and at least got to hang around Clara, the lead, so they were cool by association. But I had missed my window. I was too tall, already closer in height to the adults. The best I could hope for, if I were truly dedicated and could get really good at pointe, was to someday be a snowflake.

I was cast as the ninth mouse, a role unique to the Albany-Berkshire Ballet. Hunched over, I would creep onto the empty stage, scurrying around the Christmas tree and waving to the audience with mousey hubris. While my back was turned, two toy soldiers, wheeling in a cannon made from a fire extinguisher, would shoot me in the ass. Once I'd run back into the wings, clutching my butt, the real fight could begin between the armies of mice and soldiers, with the Nutcracker himself battling the Mouse King. I would emerge again a few minutes later, this time falling for the old cheese-in-the-trap routine, and then retreat behind a couch to weep and wring my paws for my fallen comrades as we were defeated. My favorite move during this scene was to make several exaggerated signs of the cross.

At first, I was alternately ashamed (because the part didn't require any real balletic ability, just hamming it up a little and hitting the marks on time) and excited (I, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of the battle between rodents and toys, would get a solo). I settled on excited and practiced my scampering in front of our living room's picture window. At least, I'd get laughs – most of the time. (Some audiences were tough; they didn't come to the ballet for slapstick.)

It is strange, now, to see that I chose to do all this at the height of puberty (though not, sadly, the peak of my awkwardness). More than a few teachers and friends described me at that age as "painfully shy". Which makes me wonder - painful for whom? The others around me? Or can that also describe the feeling of being surrounded by people and unsure of what to say or how to act? Perhaps both.

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Performances turned out to be mostly vast stretches of waiting. Our group of mice and soldiers would claim a corner of the cavernous backstage area: somewhere deep in the heart of a local college's theater and hang out until our cue. Those hours of nothing to do but socialize with other girls I didn't know well, some of them a few years older and beautiful, poised, already being groomed to join the junior company, would make my stomach flip far more acrobatically than it would at the thought of walking onstage. I'd do my best to remain smilingly invisible, while in my head I would catalogue the smells of an old theater green room: balsamic shoe rosin, musty costumes, hairspray for every bun, stale french fries from dinner break. We were allowed to run outside, when our parents dropped off food during that wasteland between matinees and evening shows. My mother would cheerfully deliver my McDonald's, calling to me through the open car window as I turned to head back inside, a poem she's recited as long as I can remember:

Love to eat them mousies

Mousies what I love to eat

Bite they tiny heads off

Nibble on they tiny feet

I'd give her a strained half-smile ("Mom...!") and wave as she drove away.

The worst part, as mice, we were denied hair and makeup! Our faces would be engulfed in giant costume mouse heads, and good luck getting that thing to stay in a position where I could see through at least one of the mesh eye holes. For the rest of the cast, all that time waiting was used to slick hair back into immovable chignons and to cake on blush and mascara, the one occasion for an eleven-year-old this would be allowed. We'd wait til the last minute before putting on our costumes, furry gray overalls with a wire sewn into the waist like a hula hoop, making us resemble lumpy Hershey's Kisses. After several performances, an older dancer (to whom I owe a debt of gratitude) told me that wearing a baseball cap underneath the mouse head would keep it in place so I could see. She was right. But to walk past the angels and sugar plums in my Red Sox hat felt like supreme injustice.

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During one performance, the curtain came down after the Nutcracker had triumphed in combat, and everyone: mice, soldiers, stagehands began the nightly scramble to remove props and switch sets in preparation for the next scene, the dance of the snowflakes. I headed for the wings, dodging the grandfather clock and maneuvering my roundness past dancers, but I apparently wasn't quick enough. Someone shoved me, two hands, hard. "Move!" I couldn't turn my enormous head around to see who'd done it and already I was being swept up in the wave of cast members moving backstage, but my money is on a snowflake.

It embodied how I felt much of the time back then, to be pushed by the very person I wanted to be (and who lived up to the stereotype of bitchy ballerinas in doing so). Watching myself in the mirror during ballet class, I already knew I didn't have "it". Not for lack of skill necessarily, I followed directions well and had the muscle control to imitate nearly every move, but there was the problem: it was imitation. I didn't possess the grace, or ease, or whatever ineffable quality that made it dance and not calisthenics. Like a precocious casting director, I could pick out the girls in my class who had that spark, and the ones who were like me. Disappointing, certainly, but it kept me from what could've been a long struggle for mediocrity, requiring an ambition that would make stupid things like shoving someone commonplace.

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There are four beats of near-silence just before the oboe signals my entrance where nothing is happening onstage. Time enough to feel like a decision; if I step past the curtain, there's no stopping. The current will carry me forward, the story unfolding until it reaches the end. I'll play my part in that, however small.

In the Christmases that followed, despite having retired from my role, I'd receive gifts of a notepad with mice decorating the border or a ceramic mouse figurine, and later, sometimes for no occasion at all.

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My mother wished for me to become a doctor. When I told her I had no interest, she'd reassure me, "There are lots of different kinds of doctors." Sometime during high school, science and medicine began to draw me in, and like any good teenager, I changed my mind. I wanted to go to medical school. Not long after announcing this decision, my mother read an article that said the average age for doctors to break even on their student loans was 52. She clipped the article for me, highlighted the numbers. "Nursing is a noble profession, you know."

For two summers during college, I worked in the lab of a busy doctor's office drawing blood. It was mostly horrifying to my sheltered sensibilities, but it paid well. I reminded myself that all the sick babies and heroin addicts and "please pee in this cup" would be valuable experience for

my burgeoning medical career. Apparently, phlebotomy was my hidden talent. By my third day I was promoted from practicing on the rubber dummy arm to sticking real patients. The key is in the hands. Fingertips feeling the crook of an elbow need to recognize a pressed vein's subtle bounce, like a cake springing back, ready to come out of the oven. Hands should be strong enough to steady a patient's squirming arm, but gentle, so they don't feel manhandled. Above all, they should be assured. No one wants to be pierced with a needle slowly.

During a quiet morning in the lab, I was wrapping up a draw on an elderly man, a regular customer. As I labeled his tubes, my back turned, I heard his cane clatter on the floor. I reached down to pick it up. "Let me get that for y-". He was sliding down and out of the plastic chair unconscious, his slack face like putty. Someone shouted down the hall for a nurse, and I flattened myself against a wall while they did what could be done until the ambulance arrived. Later they told me he'd had a cardiac event. It wasn't my fault; he was in poor health. I never heard if he made it, just that his family had been summoned to the ER. Even if you're not the kind of person who searches for the barest threads of connection in everyday occurrences, it's difficult to follow a line from I-Stuck-A-Needle-In-Him directly to His-Heart-Stopped and not feel responsible in some way. My boss saw the look on my face and gave me the rest of the day off. I sat in the car a long time before leaving, tracing shapes in the dust on my dashboard, feeling the grit stick to my fingertips. The inevitability of today and all future days where I would, however indirectly, cause someone suffering coated my throat. This is not for you. I called my mom. "I don't think this is for me." "I think you're right," she said.

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In E.T.A. Hoffmann's original story of The Nutcracker, his enemy the Mouse King has seven heads.

After college, I got a job in a research lab of a medical school where one of my responsibilities was breeding mutant mice. Not multi-headed but with backwards legs. Their backwardness wasn't the object; it was an unforeseen result of removing a certain gene, one that also kept them from developing crucial organs. Without them, the mouse pups like wriggling pink erasers wouldn't live much longer than twenty-four hours. My job was to go down to the mouse house first thing in the morning to see which mothers had given birth and to collect any babies.

Collect: an innocuous word for killing an animal to see what's inside of it. Euthanize, I suppose, is the more correct term, because we were explicitly trained per animal welfare guidelines how to use sedation before death to limit any possible discomfort. This does not, I found, always ease the discomfort of the human doing the euthanizing, no matter how scientifically valid she may view this task to be.

Being a lab technician would give me valuable experience for my new career, because I had decided to be Not-That-Kind-of-Doctor – a PhD. No patients, only mice. My skill, what I hoped would make me attractive to faculty searching for a graduate student, was rodent surgery. Whenever the mutant babies were born, I would snip out their ovaries and implant them in the kidney of a normal, plain vanilla adult mouse, where they would bathe in the sea of hormones they should've been subjected to had their flipper-legged lifespan been more than one day. My boss was pleased that I had come up with a way to carry out this experiment, and that I was pretty good at it. The recipient mice nearly always survived the surgery and when I'd collect the implanted ovarian tissue six weeks later it was nearly always intact. Then, we could see if any of those hormones had had an effect.

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Some of a newborn pup's organs were so tiny, a microscope was needed for them to be found. An ovary fit on the tip of the thinnest needle-like forceps. Using miniature instruments, I would gently grasp the fragile translucent membrane that surrounds the kidney of the sedated host and poke a hole in it. As I held up the opening created, I'd carefully nestle the ovary inside this sheath, its new home. (A shaking hand here and suddenly this speck is lost among folds of intestine, or worse, I've scratched the spleen.) I'd pray that when pulling the forceps back everything stayed put. The membrane was too delicate to sew up, so my only hope was that the tiny pearl tucked inside didn't slip away before there's time to heal. (This is where science feels less than scientific, one of those times where you just wing it.)

Suturing the pink flesh of the body cavity was awkward at first, having to relearn the simplest tasks of sewing and tying knots not with fingers but with tweezers, though before long it was second nature and became strangely soothing. I would finish with the skin and fur, stapled. All of this before the anesthesia wore off.

A fun party trick, when I was stuck talking to someone whose company I wanted to be rid of, was to answer honestly the question, "So what do you do?"

My mother was proud of my success. I don't think she quite understood my career path, but white coats were involved, so all appeared to be well. Around this time, she also realized given my current profession that she could continue with her thematic gifts. She already had an eye for mouse curios – the tradition could live on! She's a thoughtful person, and when she comes across something that reminds her of me, she likes for me to know. She once sent a card that read "Thinking of you" beneath a photograph of two baby mice. To the average person they are adorable: little eyes half-opened, the brown fur that looks so soft. To me they are eight days old, they are agouti-colored, they are exactly like the ones who house the organs I collected, the ones I put to sleep then guillotined with scissors.

Sometimes I would sit alone in the windowless surgical suite, waiting for the mice to wake up drunk from their anesthesia, and it would seem unbelievable that a world existed outside where people made conference calls and wore business casual clothing that didn't smell of urine and mouse chow. People confident in the value of their contributions, or so I assumed. They played their part in progress. For myself, I wasn't expecting some massive breakthrough, but it was getting harder to be content with what felt like the glacial pace of research, going on the hope that I was an element of forward motion.

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The flip side of breeding is that there are many animals – the ones who won't be used for experiments – who must also be euthanized. According to my estimates, I've killed more than 10,000 mice. Of course, there are the specific technical terms for what I had to do – asphyxiation, decapitation, cervical dislocation – words to distance me from my actions, theoretically. The first time I watched my boss break a mouse's neck without bothering to put on gloves, what turned my stomach wasn't the thought of touching a rodent with bare hands. I needed those six millimeters of latex to dampen the sensations I felt in my fingers of snapping and shivering, even if that distance was only minute, even if it was only in my head.

After a few years, when people at parties asked me what I did, I'd tell them but a little more obliquely. Sometimes they'd follow up with, "And what's that like?" All I could really think to say was, "It weighs on you."

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Though I left the lab for several reasons (without a PhD) years ago, my mother still looks out for

mouse ephemera; it's gone on too long now to stop. Recently she sent another card, this time to celebrate my promotion at work, a role that I can play which requires of my hands nothing more than typing. "Conga-rats!" it read, beneath a line of rodents dancing.



About the Author: Brooke Middlebrook grew up in the hills of western Massachusetts. She currently resides in Houston, Texas, where she is a medical writer.

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