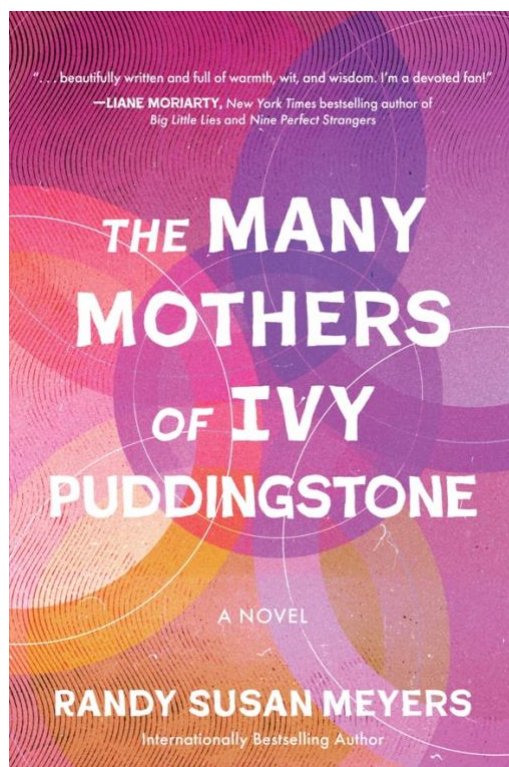


The Many Mothers of Ivy Puddingstone by Randy Susan Meyers
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Excerpt



Prologue
Ivy
JANUARY 1984
Dealers-Choice Granola

Once upon a time, I belonged to a tribe of kids who ran free. Too free.

I grew to hate and love many things while living in Vermont for those years. The umpteen words for pot drove me crazy even before I hated smoking, smelling, or seeing the substance. I'll never miss the choking odor of patchouli oil, the flavor of brown rice, or the sight of stir-fried vegetables drenched in tamari sauce.

I hated the word screwing. In truth, I hated all references to sex. Roundhouse, our commune in Vermont, practically made a nun out of me. And I'm not sure if I can use those words in a college admission essay, but don't they tell you what Roundhouse did to me? Freedom of expression was sacred there.

I almost began to hate art because my mother personified creativity. I missed her so much during my years at Roundhouse that my love for her sometimes turned to hate, but I could never sustain the emotion. I treasured her cataclysmic and vivid paintings; good and evil came alive with her oils and watercolors.

Roundhouse still occupies my dreams—sometimes, in my sleep, Poppy and I laugh as we paint chains of outsized daisies around the massive barn, splayed old brushes spattering our skin purple and yellow. In my nightmares, my brother and I race in endless circles, searching for the grown-ups.

I imagine the joy of the follow-your-passion days—as declared by the grown-ups—when the seven of us chose our paths for the day. Poppy and I once spent an entire passion day coloring our nails with magic markers, rolling our hair in giant curlers, and beautifying ourselves in filched makeup. We jumped in the pond each time we finished a new look, scrubbed our skin with sandy dirt, and then began again.

The mothers hated that one.

The grown-ups christened our children’s community Roundhouse. They believed Roundhouse would fulfill their dream of a children’s utopia, but neither the word their dream nor utopia ever described Roundhouse before or after.

The house in Boston, where I was born and spent my youngest years and where they remained after they sent us to Vermont, Puddingstone, was a nod to the quarries from which our house sprang.

They loosely modeled Roundhouse—very loosely—on a kibbutz in Israel, as per the memory of my father, who had once lived in one for three weeks; they built us an ersatz kibbutz minus the discipline, set routines, and soothing nightly visits from parents.

Roundhouse’s name was a nod to Joni Mitchell’s “Circle Game.” Irony flooded me when, at sixteen, I learned that Joni had placed her daughter for adoption.

My brother and I still crack up when we talk about that choice.

Our grown-ups swore their fondest wish was for us to be raised free. We were to be cuddly lambs gamboling in the meadows. More often, we resembled Norwegian lemmings, animals with a ferocious survival instinct who turn on creatures far beyond their size.

Other times, we became a pack of orphaned puppies, depending on each other, no matter how much we might growl. Like most kids who don't trust their parents, we protected members of our clutch even if we occasionally nipped at each other.

According to their original statement of purpose, still bound in the red and purple leather journal handmade by my mother, our parents planned an idyll where nature would nurture us. Fresh air! Organic vegetables we grew with our own hands! Milk from the cows we raised from calves!

Neither cows nor calves materialized, and plucking disgusting bugs off the few vegetables that grew became automatic. I longed for the Green Giant string beans with almonds my grandmother served alongside her roasted chicken—something else I craved. Poppy and I papered our room with ragged-edged advertisements torn from magazines. We woke to Chef Boyardee holding a can of his ravioli, staring at us with grandfatherly beneficence while our dealers-choice granola waited in the kitchen.

Our parents suspended their choices on claims of wanting us to be free of hang-ups. Once, I believed Roundhouse came about because they knew true freedom to follow their dreams meant choosing between them or us, and we lost the coin toss. They didn't want to become hung up on the twisted cords of familial connections as they pursued their politics and passions. Hung up. Hang-ups. More words I learned to hate.

Marching, getting arrested, and saving the world left little time for pushing us on playground swings and helping with homework. Maybe my parents considered themselves as having sacrificed for the cause; I believed they forfeited us.

When I was born, my mother was very young; I don't think I was ever as young as she was. But our path to Roundhouse began the year my mother Annabel turned eighteen—well

before I was born—when one makes the bravest and the clumsiest decisions—often at the exact same moment.

When I hit fifteen, I told myself freedom, to them, had been just another word for sleeping with each other in any combination that struck their fancy without any watchful children inhibiting their bed-hopping.

If that were true, they could have avoided sending us to Vermont if they'd read Victor Hugo's words—no one can keep a secret better than a child.

But I couldn't hold that belief. Imagining her and the other women slipping in and out of the arms of varied partners made me want to throw up. Sacrificing themselves on the stake like Joan of Arc in the name of freedom was easier to imagine than them having sex with each other. I decided they were too humorless to have that much fun.

My father referred to Roundhouse as “parenting with intentionality.” The grown-ups planned to parent us in shifts, just like they took turns cleaning the toilets and cooking meals according to the elaborate chore chart on the kitchen wall. Imagining their enthusiasm took no effort on my part. When it came to Roundhouse, they probably believed that with the right chart, parental responsibilities could come down to a weekend or two per month—less with artful trading—and a few full weeks each year. However, as it played out, schedules for when they came to see us became as loose as their work commitments were iron-clad.

My singular goal became getting my mother alone when she came for her childcare weeks—an impossible dream; my brother affixed himself to her as though they were magnets of opposite polarities. And then, when I wended my way between them, I still competed with the

five other Roundhouse children, all desperate for her artsy-craftsy, intense-when-in-the-moment version of mothering.

All the kids craved attention from the women of Puddingstone traveling from Boston to Putney. We also reveled in holding the spotlight of the men—the fathers—but they didn't make or break us like the mothers. We liked impressing the fathers and were dazzled by their building, fixing, and braininess feats, but they weren't the mothers.

We wanted to suck in Melanie's calm warmth, laugh at Suze's humor, and imitate Roxanne's haughty glamor. Diantha, our permanent house mother, was a victim of familiarity. We could ignore her.

But only the presence of Annabel, my real mother, allowed me to relax my hypervigilance and act out the way kids need to. Mom offered me her totality of love, but only when she was there—and most of the time, she wasn't.

She made everything fun: mud pies became impressionistic art, weaving yarn God's Eyes brought magical mysticism, and our plays became fodder for political interpretations. Most importantly, we cracked her up.

Her ability to be fantastic made me even angrier at being separated.

Early on in the experiment, our grown-ups thought they could be a friends-with-benefits version of parents, the first generation to have children without the struggle—all the while holding fast to the belief that they offered us utopia.

Once upon a time, I tried to figure out if we were the victims of a failed experiment or the best of loving intentions that lacked actual parameters.

—Ivy Pascal's College Admission Essay to Pratt University in 1984

Chapter 1

Annabel

JUNE 1964

Why Pray When You Can Knit?

My parents planted the seeds of radical change in me with less than zero intention. By the time I reached eighteen, those seeds had grown into vines thick enough to choke out the merest whiff of injustice.

My mother and father believed an overnight camp, a mere hour's drive from our home in Rhinebeck, would be better than hanging out with my friends on Montgomery Street. They nodded with approval at Camp Wonder's brochure, which promised that spinning clay bowls and learning the breaststroke would be side by side with civic virtue, integrity, and moral values. And, of course, as I got older, they hoped the bonus would be that an all-girls overnight camp would keep me from fast boys.

My virtuous, hard-working folks believed the Unitarian Universalist camp's beliefs would resemble those of our Good Shepherd Church. However, by the time my father realized the staff clung closer to folk- music-Christian—his description—than traditional service-driven Catholicism, that train had left the station.

I began camp at the age of twelve. By thirteen, I'd given up greed, substituting begging for candy with chanting, "Trick or Treat for UNICEF!"

At fourteen, while friends practiced makeup techniques meant to capture the interest of the boys in town, I honed my art by painting fields of waving daisies to cheer up the walls of the depressing local senior center in the basement of Good Shepherd.

At fifteen, while my sisters practiced going ever lower while dancing the limbo, I joined my mother and her friends in scrubbing and repainting a nursery school in the poorest section of nearby Poughkeepsie.

At sixteen, almost seventeen, I unearthed a copy of *The Red Record* deep in the stacks of Rhinebeck's small-town library. After sobbing and struggling through Ida B. Wells's accounts of lynching and other racial murders, the axis of my world spun to civil rights. I bought and then wore out Pete Seeger's album, *We Shall Overcome*.

I declared myself a free-thinking Unitarian and boiled my life's goal down to their three mantras: love radically, serve gratefully, and wonder daily. Thus, a year later, as a college freshman in Boston, I vibrated with surety when I stumbled upon a flyer seeking volunteers to register voters in Mississippi. As I filled out the forms, I devised plans to convince my parents to sign the consent portion. Being only eighteen, I still needed their permission.

Over Easter weekend, I began my campaign, starting with my mother. She expected her daughters—I was the youngest of the four sisters—to welcome the marginalized and care for the sick, needy, underprivileged, widowed, orphaned, abused, and vulnerable. Those who were last should come first. Camille Cooper taught her children that Christianity translated to mercy, forgiveness, love, praying for our enemies, and, most of all, action.

Camille never prayed to keep a poor child warm when she could knit him a sweater, so to persuade her, I'd aim straight at her belief in active purpose.

After Easter dinner, alone with my mother in the kitchen I'd cleaned till it sparkled, I clutched my Mississippi Freedom Summer Project brochure so hard that it got wrinkled while presenting my dream. I emphasized the word nonviolent in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC—and then pointed to the artwork of Black and White hands clasped together. I made it sound like I'd be ladling soup to the poorest in America.

My mother nodded in approval. My father required different tactics.

“Daddy, I don't know what I'll do if I can't go to Mississippi! Helping these people is my calling. I feel a burning in my heart! Look at what my friends are doing—drinking and racing off in cars with boys they barely know. I don't want any of that, Daddy. I want to be decent like you and Mom.”

My father, a flinty fiscal conservative who gave everyone a fair shake if they did the same, had hands as hard as the wood he chopped, but he held a gooey core for his four daughters—especially me, his baby.

Like my mother, he chose a varietal of Christianity he deemed formed in the tradition of charity and valued practical measures.

My pitch highlighted the nursery school, the reading curriculum, and practical projects that would resonate with both of my parents. Registering voters would mirror Mom holding book drives at Good Shepherd Church and Daddy helping drivers stuck in the blizzards blanketing the Taconic Highway every winter.

My parents sent me off with a wad of traveler's checks and a stern warning to hide the billfold. I nodded and hugged them both tight before brushing away every bit of advice they gave.

Two months later, during training at the Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, Freedom Summer trainers shared graphic details about the coming dangers: bloodthirsty men traveling in packs, the KKK fomenting unwarranted arrests while delivering beatings and hanging men from trees. They whispered the word rape; they pounded desks and lecterns while warning us of lynch mobs and burning crosses. It seemed that fewer of the White volunteers took their counsel as much to heart as the staff wanted. Some eyes glazed over in the stifling heat of the crowded lecture rooms, while others widened in terror at our imagined future.

We practiced self-defense on the green grass of Ohio, learning what to do if we were attacked. Roll up in a ball. Don't let your legs stick out—those legs could be broken with one stomp. Watch for cars without license plates and cops without badges.

The trainers worked to push my lifetime learning of going to the police for help out of me. They warned us to keep the shades down at night and never stand in a lighted doorway.

They instructed newcomers with cars to remove the dome lights to avoid being illuminated, to check their cars for bombs every morning, to learn all the roads in and out of town, and to memorize the danger spots. The staff warned us to vary routes when driving—and never let a stranger pass them on the road. That car might block our path forward—a warning of impending violence. Most importantly, the trainers repeated daily, never go anywhere alone.

Our introduction to the reality of the Klan was hard and ugly, as our trainer shared from a pamphlet titled *Why You Should Join the Ku Klux Klan*, emphasizing why Jews, Papists, Turks, Mongols, Tartars, Oriental, Negroes, or any other person the Klan considered foreign to the Anglo-Saxons should not apply for membership or, it seemed, for human rights. The Klan recruitment posters they shared, with masked White men, crosses, and licks of flames, haunted me.

A tall, spare Black supervisor from California read the words NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins had given at a press conference following the brutal murder of Medgar Evers in his driveway the previous summer. “There is no state with a record that approaches that of Mississippi in inhumanity, murder, brutality, and racial hatred. It is absolutely at the bottom of the list.”

After training, SNCC assigned me to Greenwood, Mississippi, where I’d teach the ABCs at a church—a choice that offered my parents the reassurance they craved when I called. I made summer school sound as safe as ladling soup.