

# THE WILD OTHER



THE  
WILD OTHER



A Memoir  
CLOVER STROUD

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This is a work of non-fiction based on the life, experiences and recollections of the author. In some limited cases names of people and places have been changed to protect the privacy of others.

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*For Pete, forever.*



## CHAPTER 1

I spent the hottest summer of my life shut behind glass. By mid-June my fourth child – a second son, called Dashiell or Dash – was two months old, and I felt completely enclosed. I was here with Dash, and everyone else was over there, in the sun, rainbow prisms of light shimmering around them as they ran through a hose sprinkling cold water onto the lawn, pink mouths open with laughter.

I felt like a fist. Dash was always naked, plastered bare to my breast, sucking from me as my body dripped milk and tears. Here, beside him, was the only space I belonged, even if I could barely breathe. I kept myself pressed to him, limiting the time I had to look away from his tiny face and up out at the world, which had spun right away from me in the weeks since he'd arrived in my arms.

The sitting room and kitchen where I spent most of that summer were on the first floor of our 1960s townhouse. Getting downstairs and out with a new baby and a toddler was a performance, so our home changed from the place where I'd felt most happy to my own private prison. Dash was born when his sister Evangeline was not yet two. She had to be watched, lifted, bathed, fed and cared for all the

time as well. We had no garden, except for a communal, unfenced space running onto a road in front of the house. Jimmy and Dolly, my elder children who were then fourteen and eleven, seemed far away from the babies and me all through that summer holiday. Sometimes they ran in and out of view, ice creams running onto wrists and wet hair plastered to their necks, dripping water from the paddling pool on the strip of shared lawn. I sat on the sofa upstairs, feeding Dash, but the toddler Evangeline had to be locked in upstairs too, since she ran into the road if someone didn't watch her all the time.

'Outside,' Evangeline would sigh, climbing onto the back of the sofa, reaching sticky hands up to the big glass windows. She pressed so hard on the glass I was afraid she'd fall through, so a carpenter put wooden bars across the panes. Then the sitting room felt even hotter and the world outdoors even further from reach.

In the late evenings, after it was dark, the elder children would pad around me like leopards, mewing and hissing when I turned around to them on the stairs. In the daytime they ignored me and ran away when I asked them what they wanted for lunch, but when the darkness of night came and Dash and Evangeline slept, they needed me so much. Motherhood was suffocating me.

When Jimmy and Dolly had been born I'd felt like a warrior, but becoming a mother a third and fourth time had undone me. When I looked at Evangeline's tiny hands – curled tight, urgent with need – or the gently closed lids on Dash's tiny face, I became overwhelmed with fear that I'd fail them. I was terrified I'd spent all the mothering I had first time around with my older children.

Depression had first slid inside me when Evangeline was two or three months old. It slunk around after me, following to the shops, waiting at the school gates, sitting beside me in the car, however much I blinked and told myself: 'I'm alright. I'm alright. Am I alright? I'm alright.'

I still felt for my new children every ounce of the painful and ferocious love I'd had for Jimmy and Dolly, the sort of love that made me want to consume my babies, but that love was now undercut by a brand-new sense of panic. It echoed far away, beyond

me, but right inside me too, like a quiet, persistent noise in a distant room in my head. That panic switched itself on as soon as I opened my eyes in the morning and rang all day; an inner alarm that stopped me thinking, stopped me being, sometimes stopped me breathing. Several times a day I'd catch myself holding a breath for seconds at a time. I was very far away from everything close to me.

When Evangeline was still a baby, I would take her into bed with me, pretending to sleep. The covers felt like a hide in the forest into which I could crawl to bury myself among the worms, while beetles scurried over me and the wet earth oozed inside my clothes. Sticky with guilt, when sleep finally came it wasn't comfortable, but it silenced the alarm for a bit.

My family and friends came to see my third baby and some of them said to me, 'You must be so happy now,' and I would nod, gulping back at them, 'Yes, I must be so happy.' What they meant was: you must be so happy since for a while back there, Clover, it really looked like you'd fucked up! How you were living back there, with different men in your life, made us uncomfortable.

And they were right because when I lay in silence with my baby, I was happy. But there was also something nameless and murky, imprecise in shape yet as hard as flint inside me. I was living a version of me but it felt like the real me was watching, judging, from a distance. I was beside myself.

In the kitchen I'd turn my back on the sharp silver knife lying beside the onion I'd been slicing, afraid that my hand might quietly run it into my baby's skull. I'd imagine the knife slicing the skull as neatly as a melon and calmly wonder if a baby's head would make that same, soft, wet, *thunk* noise fruit makes when split open. A high window or bridge made me giddy with longing to gently drop my baby over the edge, so I'd tuck my hands under my armpits to make sure I didn't do it. Once, beside the tall stairwell of a friend's house, I'd had to sit on the floor to resist my desire to throw the baby down it. Walking along the river with the baby in a sling, I imagined filling my coat with rocks and wading in because then we could be

cosy and go together. I loved them deeply and completely but with a consuming passion that scared me.

More than anything, I was filled with a sense of homesickness for a mother and a home I hadn't known for over twenty years. Being homesick felt like it might kill me.

'Do you imagine harming yourself?'

The health visitor dropped the question into our conversation like an egg yolk falling silently into a bowl of flour, as I poured steaming water over tea bags in my kitchen.

'Of course I do,' I replied, putting the kettle carefully back onto its stand to avoid her eyes. 'I imagine doing the very worst thing I can possibly think of to my baby. And then I imagine killing myself. But isn't that normal?'

I had told her my thoughts, but I imagined it was as obvious to her as day is light that I wasn't going to act on them. She kept telling me about mindfulness so I thought she'd understand. They were just thoughts, taking me to the darkest place they could to teach me how to get back into the light. They weren't real.

She sent me to talk to a perinatal psychiatrist, who filmed me playing with a toy tea set with Evangeline. For the first minute I felt embarrassed by the sound of my own voice, which for the past few weeks had sounded quite alien to me, as if someone else's voice box – lower, sterner than mine – had taken over my throat. I leant forward towards my daughter, holding out a plastic cup while trying to imagine what a good mother might say and how she would sound.

'Evangeline, where is your cup of tea? Is this the teacup?'

Evangeline's cobalt blue eyes fixed on me, as if I really had become the mad woman I felt was living inside me. She grabbed the cup, banging it against a pile of coloured saucers, sending them flying across the mat as her face creased into a pink grin. I clapped, then pretended to drink from it and she laughed again so that I forgot the camera and for a few moments could play with my daughter as if I wasn't being watched and my ability as a mother wasn't being scrutinised.

A week later, in our next session, the psychiatrist played the film back to me. In those few moments of footage, I didn't see myself. Instead I watched a different woman smiling at Evangeline, gently stroking her hair flat, then leaning in to kiss her, and in that moment I felt a thread that had been tugging and tangled inside me suddenly dragged tight. The past was pulled into focus shrill and sharp, delightful and terrible at the same time, and there was my mother in my place. As I watched myself in that footage kissing Evangeline, I understood that that was how she had kissed me, that was how she had cared for me and talked to me. I saw that that was how she had loved me.

Of course it was my mother. My mother, who was alive and dead at the same time.

'Your mum, is she nearby? Could she pop over to give you a bit of a break?' the health visitor asked innocently as we stood in my kitchen again. She had red hair as thick as her Irish accent. It hung in a heavy fringe over her eyes, and she wore leather lace-up boots with flat soles that reminded me of a pair Mum had worn when I was a child: they were green leather with hooks and eyes that she'd tied with black laces.

I paused, pushing the spoon I was using to squeeze water from the tea bags so hard against the edge of the cup that the tea bag ripped, sending black dots of leaves swirling across the water. And then I spoke.

'I do have a mother but she's not here. I mean, she lives quite near here in a nursing home near Swindon, but she's not really around, or here, or anywhere. She's got brain damage from a riding accident on her horse a long time ago and she doesn't know anyone and she can't do anything. She can't talk or feed herself or walk and she's incontinent and has epileptic fits and she doesn't have any teeth any more because she got ulcers so they all had to be taken out and—' I took a gulp of tea, galloping on before she could say anything. I wanted to get it out there quickly, like a road map

smoothed open on the steering wheel when you're lost. 'She doesn't know who I am or who anyone is and it's been like that since I was sixteen. She hasn't been able to talk or communicate in any way since then, although she did try to kill herself when I was at university, by taking an overdose of anticonvulsants, and then she was in a coma again for a few days and a bit worse when she woke up. She's lived in hospitals or nursing homes for twenty years now but it's fine. It's really fine. I mean, she's not fine but I'm fine because it's been like that for a long time. So. Well, you know, she's not dead but she's not exactly here either. It was just an accident. A very bad riding accident.'

I smiled at her, to prove I really was OK with it. I'd spoken those words so many times in my life and I always felt I had to reassure the person who had asked, so that they didn't need to be embarrassed by the answer.

The health visitor hugged her hands around her cup, glancing briefly at a recent photograph stuck on the fridge of Jimmy leading a pony along a road. She tipped her head to one side, looking even more concerned than she had a few minutes before.

'And you . . . you still ride, do you?'

I don't know what our childhood would have been like if Mum hadn't left the city and taken us to the country. I cannot conceive of my life now without the influence that ponies and then horses have had on it and the thread they've woven through every single part of my life, even when I didn't know it. We moved from Oxford to a village in Wiltshire when I was seven and when I allow my mind to spool around the maze of other avenues I might have taken, the thing I find hardest to imagine is life without horses.

My life with no horses would have been very different, because if we hadn't moved to the country there would never have been an accident. Or, at least, not a riding accident. There might have been other horrors, because most people have something, but I don't think there would have been an accident quite like that one,

which has changed the colour of every single day since then. And although I know my life without the accident would have followed a completely different course, the only one I want is this one, with the accident right in the middle, running through everything I do. The day of the accident wrote *trauma* inside me and I've never rubbed that out because it's part of me and it's mine.

Sometimes my sense of Mum is bound so closely with the accident that I see them both as one word: mumsaccident. Mumsaccident was a single domino that tipped over on 25 November 1991 and sent a trail of little black squares tumbling forward, their onward force unstoppable through time.

The funny thing is that hurting us was the last thing my mother wanted to do. She wasn't barbed and she didn't criticise. 'My mum's a bitch,' my friend Sarah told me on the bus to school, but I didn't understand what she was talking about. Mum was never one of those mothers their daughters complain about. I never wished she'd just leave me alone. I never wanted her to mind her own business; I always wanted her there.

Mum loved expansively. Her love was huge and generous and everywhere, so that just existing a single day as her daughter felt like standing under the bright spotlight of a force that only ever protected. From the day I was born, on 16 April 1975, I had 6,067 days like that before the accident turned the spotlight off; the flick of a switch plunging a bright room into black. That number of days is the same as 866 and a half weeks, or 145,608 hours, or 8,736,480 minutes, or 524,188,800 seconds. It can never have been enough.

Very occasionally, I dream about Mum, but time in my dreams is indeterminate so when I wake up I feel as if she's always been there with me in the thick syrup of sleep, but just a few moments later she's gone again forever. Maybe my sleeping self knows this because when I wake up dreaming of Mum, my face is always wet with silent tears. Give me back just five of those 8,736,480 minutes with her and I promise I'll never complain again.

I don't know if Mum set out purposefully to create a kind of enchantment in our childhood, but it is what she achieved.

'Housewife' isn't the right word to describe Mum, as it makes me think of dusty brushes left too long in a cupboard under the stairs, and she would certainly have resisted the more lyrical, American 'home-maker' too, although that's what she was.

When we were small, Mum occasionally did some very part-time work as a secretary in the psychology department in Oxford. Once, when I was five and Mrs Sandles, the lady who came to clean the house and look after my sister Nell and me when Mum was out, was ill, Mum took me with her. Nell went to play with a friend, but Mum put me into the seat on the back of her bike and cycled to the office.

I sat under her desk and drew a picture of a house on a piece of lined paper, using a ruler and a pencil. The house looked pointy and not like somewhere anyone would want to spend time, so Mum pulled me up onto her lap, tearing a clean piece of paper from her pad.

'Look, what about nice big lines like this?' she said, holding my wrist and sketching the shape of a house across the sheet. I'd tried to draw a tree using the ruler, but Mum created a whole garden and a house with a chimneypot and big windows and an open front door in a few generous strokes. 'You need a garden and lots of rooms for your children and smoke coming out of the chimney so it's cosy like this.' Her long, brown, curly hair brushed against my face as she drew, her hand carefully holding mine. When she hugged me, she smelt of Chanel No. 5 and something else which was only hers that made me feel everything would always be good.

After the accident, when she was in a coma, I went to the cupboard in her room to press my face into the tangle of her scarves – to try and smell her again. The pink silk scarf she wore with a tweed coat swirled away, dizzying me, as the silence of her room enclosed me. I pressed my face hard into that scarf, but it didn't smell like her any more.

The day Mum drew the house with me at the psychology department was not the first time I'd been there. When I was one, Mum volunteered for some research into maternal bonding that

was part of a university study. Afterwards, she kept a black-and-white photograph of me by her bed, which was taken as part of the study. Printed from a video still, it had a number on the bottom of it. In it, I'm staring wide-eyed with attention into the camera.

'We had to do little tests, like to see if you would follow my eyes when I was looking in a certain direction, or whether you would look at my hand when I was pointing at pictures,' Mum told me later. 'They looked at lots of mothers and babies, but you and I had the highest score.' She made me feel as though, together, we'd won a big, important competition, and I imagined a whole line of mothers pointing at things to make their babies prove how much they loved them. I'd tell other people about this study: 'Did you know that when I was one I was more closely bonded with my mum than any other baby?'

Mum said we were telepathic too. When I was seven she ran a stall for 'guess the number of sweets in a jar' at the school fete. The jar was a glass spaghetti jar that an actress had given my father after he'd directed her in a film.

'I mean, who on earth bothers to put spaghetti in a jar? Spaghetti gets eaten, not displayed,' Mum had said, stuffing the pale-green glass jar with flumps, white mice and tutti frutti we'd bought in white paper bags from the shop. She wouldn't tell my sister Nell or me how many sweets she'd bought; 'And anyway, you're not going to enter as the last thing I want is this awful jar back in the kitchen,' she said, although I'm not sure it really was the jar that had offended her. My father also had a framed photograph on the mantelpiece in his study of a woman's suntanned, slender feet, with a label attached in elegant handwriting that read, 'It *was* a photograph of my feet you wanted, wasn't it, Rick?' He'd been given the picture by another actress he was working with, and Mum didn't like that photo much either.

We took the spaghetti jar to the school fete and after I'd spent my pocket money on a doll in a knitted dress from the bric-a-brac stall and Nell had won a bottle of Lambrini and a fondue set on the tombola, I persuaded Mum, yawning at her stand, to let me

have a guess. I knew I'd guessed just right when I saw a certain look of surprise and irritation pass across Mum's face, although she didn't tell me until later, when I was old enough to understand what telepathic meant. She sent the spaghetti jar off to a child whose father had died falling off a roof fixing some gutters, but she stopped at the shop to buy sherbet lemons for Nell and me on the way home.

It's perhaps misleading that one of my earliest memories of Mum was of her doing the drawings with me in the psychology department, because I don't really remember her sitting down to draw, or sitting down to do anything very much. She was always standing: in the garden to dead-head roses; or at the kitchen table to pound dough for the bread she baked most days – thick brown loaves with crunchy crusts that she'd slice for us while they were still hot, spread with cold yellow butter in pats so thick they looked like chunks of Cheddar. She also stood at the stove to make hot milk with honey for us at bed time, or in the tack room, to clean a bridle, and she stood at the gate too, to watch us on our ponies as Nell and I cantered around the field beyond the house after the hay had been cut.

She was not a mother who did crafting, or who would sit down on the carpet to play with dolls. I don't think I ever once remember her playing a game like that, although when we were teenagers we forced her to play Monopoly when she'd much rather have been watching *Dallas*, because she really liked JR. So Mum didn't really play, but what she was, was always there.

'Isn't it wonderful how they can stick egg boxes together without their hands shaking?' she'd comment, standing behind the sofa after she'd come in from the garden, dogs trailing her, and found Nell and me, legs draped over the edge of armchairs in front of *Blue Peter*. The presenters in primary-coloured jerseys with big hair were making a model village out of cardboard boxes, green felt and poster paint. Mum shifted from one foot to the other, and I felt guilty she'd found us in front of the television when I knew she wished we were out riding before it got dark. 'Wonderful, actually, how they can stick cardboard together in all that fiddly detail without

going off their heads,' she said, and then was gone, headed into the kitchen to cut up boiled mutton bones for the dogs.

When I want to find Mum, the place I go in my mind is to Minety, the village we moved to in Wiltshire on my seventh birthday. Nell and I were given kittens called Tibs and Tats, and ponies too, Marble and Pudding. It was a bit like being children in storybooks, the old-fashioned ones that Mum read aloud to us when we were still living in Oxford, and only thinking about ponies rather than living with them, like *The Black Riders* or *Jill's Gymkhana*. Of course she sat down then to read to us, her voice as constant and low as the oily paraffin night flame that she'd sometimes light in our bedroom as a treat, and not just when we were ill.

When I need the deep comfort that really going home feels like Minety is the place I take my mind to. Minety, or Myntey, from the word 'minty', because wild mint grew in the ditches and water meadows around the village where Mum taught me to recognise kingcups, campion, dog roses and harebells. We lived at Hovington House, but Mum hated the name because it sounded grand, so in my mind it's always Minty, Myntey, Minety: the lyrical word from childhood that's also haunted me because of what happened there.

But Minety didn't start until I was seven, so until then the place I remember spending most of my time was on Mum's lap, with my arms around her neck, although the place we actually lived was Oxford. That's a different word altogether, of flagged pavements, towering libraries and redbrick houses with a single light bulb left on in a top-floor window. Wildness as a child in Oxford was confined to the walls of our back garden, and it's not as vivid a place in my mind, nor does it have that pull on my heart that physically hurts me in the way Minety does. I was there but I remember only ever existing in my sister Nell's shadow. People called Nell a tomboy because she wore a blue Aertex shirt and navy cotton shorts and had bare feet all summer. Her short, dark-blond hair made her look like a boy, and when she was really concentrating, like when

we were building a den or cutting an arrow from a stick or tying our Collie dog to the sledge to make a cart, she would bite her tongue between her teeth.

'Me and Nell, we have the same thinks,' I told Mum when I was five or six, but there was a tough physicality to our sisterhood too. When we were very young we'd stick our fingers down our throats, shoulders convulsing as our eyes ran tears of discomfort and also excitement at the strange things we could make our bodies do. Nell would time how long I could hold a fizz bomb sweet in my cheek even when the acid burn hurt my face, and she'd dare me to jump from higher and higher branches of the trees in the garden. I'd always do what she said, gasping at the shooting pain rushing through my heels when the branch was too high.

We loved and fought equally so that the slap of a palm against a cheek, the breathless dig of nails into arms and thighs, and the bee-sting anger of pulled hair was there in our sisterhood too.

'Don't fight, be kind to each other. Be kind,' Mum said as we lay on a scratchy woollen rug on the floor beside her feet, scribbling on the radiator in the kitchen to make wax crayons melt. Nell gave me my first understanding that pleasure and love could hurt. We fought hard but I loved her harder than anything too and I knew she'd die for me.

'Let's make a den,' Nell would say every day, every weekend; we had an obsession to create nests we could call our own around the house and garden. My hands would feel hot and unusually close to my face as we crawled through tunnels we'd made from eiderdowns draped over our beds in our shared bedroom, our teddies and books suddenly looming large in the confines of the den, rather than on high shelves in the playroom downstairs, where everything was a tangle and always a mess.

Mum made us run outside in the early mornings in our pyjamas, out onto the wet dew of late winter, so we could feel greenness beneath our feet. By spring we'd drag eiderdowns shedding feathers or sleeping bags with crinkled orange centres into the garden to zip ourselves into them in the sun, sweating as we lay on our

stomachs and imagined what we'd be when we grew up. I wanted to be a cowgirl, but Nell's ambition was to be a monkey trainer and she slept with toy monkeys clustered around her head.

'Tell me when you're going to shut your eyes and I'll shut mine at the same time,' I'd whisper to her as we lay in the dark of our bedroom. But that was only at night. Nell is two years older than me so she started school before I did, and Mum believed in putting me to bed for an afternoon rest even when I was four. Then, I'd lie alone. Sometimes I'd hear a clop on the pavement outside, and would creep from my bed so Mum couldn't hear to sit on the wide window ledge and watch the street outside. I'd always think the sound might be a pony walking down the road; I'd feel only disappointment when all I could see was a woman in high heels, smoking as she passed.

The landmarks of our life in Oxford were the place at the end of the garden where my dad had a bonfire, the redbrick garden walls that enclosed us, and the grey pavement outside the front of the house. If we were being adventurous, there was the post box at the end of the road, but that was a no man's land that Mum didn't really let us visit on our own.

By moving to the country, Mum threw the boundaries of our world wide open. The pavements became fields around the house; our enclosed garden transformed into a tangled wilderness with a stable block with a tack room that smelt of leather, and a pond where muddy ducks splashed through shallow water. The post box was replaced by the village shop where we bought cola bottles and prawn cocktail crisps. And Nell was still barefoot all the time, even when we were riding our ponies.

What happened to Mum in the accident on 25 November 1991, and then for a long time afterwards, was as violent as flames licking through a house, burning everything that's there and leaving the heart black like charcoal. But in all the days which made up sixteen years of my life before that happened, she was just love.

‘Do you love me more than a thousand monkeys?’ Nell would ask her, standing barefoot on the tiled kitchen floor as Mum stirred handfuls of cheese into sauce for fish pie.

‘More than all the jewels in all the world,’ Mum would reply, beating melting cheese into the yellow sauce.

‘More than a million pounds?’ I’d say, pushing in front of Nell, hungry to be part of their exchange.

‘It doesn’t even compare,’ Mum laughed as the sauce thickened and she pulled it from the cooker. ‘You can’t think about love like money. I love you more than you can imagine, more than any number your mind can think of,’ she said, pouring the sauce over a dish of cooked fish coloured with pink prawns, then opening the back door so that sunshine spilt onto the kitchen floor and we blinked in the sudden warm light.

Hovington House wasn’t grand but it was big, with a swarm of rooms, some with two or three doors so that ‘Shut the door, it’s freezing out there!’ was shouted to anyone who went into the playroom. There were two staircases – games of hide and seek could last for hours – and enough bedrooms that when our elder brother and sisters, Tom, Emma and Sophy, came home at the weekends, there was always somewhere for them to sleep, even when Mum’s Citroen picking up from the Friday night train from London was full of visiting friends.

The house breathed with new people on Fridays. My father Rick worked in London all week but caught the train home at the end of the week, when the kitchen table would be crammed with people and Mum would ladle out soup bowls of beef stew and the bottles of red wine would sink fast, as candles overflowed with yellow wax into the grooves in the table.

Mum and Rick laid that beautiful life out for us like cakes with shiny coloured icing on a tartan rug. Mum let the grass on the lawn around the house grow very long, then mowed paths through it, leading out to the stables, where horses stamped in the shade,

and beyond to the pond and herb garden, past a tangle of Virginia creeper which smothered the base of the big yew tree whose blood-red berries I'd split between my fingers and thumbs because I liked seeing the poison on my skin.

There was no uniformity at Minety. The rooms that slid into cold tiled corridors and then twisting stairways without any order were covered with walls of books and a patchwork of watercolour paintings beside Lyons coffee adverts and pop-art posters my father Rick drew in his study. There, three walls were covered with video tapes marked with strips of white gaffer tape with their titles written in felt tip in my father's strong writing: *The Dam Busters*, *Paris Texas*, *A Bridge Too Far*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Once Upon a Time in the West*, *Nashville*. I didn't like going into Rick's study in the week when he was away and the curtains were drawn, but at the weekend it became an exciting place to be, especially as I got older and was allowed to stay up after supper to watch films with Rick, Mum and Nell. There was a hand grenade on his desk, and a glass bottle with three painted cigarettes in it that Rick's sister had given him when he stopped smoking the 100 a day he smoked when he met Mum. He was an undergraduate of twenty-one back then, and she was thirty-two, with three children – my siblings Emma, Sophy and Tom – and a divorce behind her.

Nell and I always called him Rick, not Dad, since that's what Emma, Tom and Sophy called him, as he was their stepfather. He often didn't feel like a 'dad', either. If I went to play with a friend after school, the sunny afternoon their mother had set up in the back garden might be darkened by the arrival of 'Dad', who was usually cross and tired and didn't want to find screaming children in the back garden. Those children's dads came back from work in a suit, carrying a briefcase, and Rick never had those. He usually wore a leather jacket and was the first person I knew to buy Timberland boots.

If Mum was all-embracing love, Rick brought glamour and excitement home to Minety. He smelt of London and although he was a television director for a while he also had an advertising

agency in Soho with an office with a glass desk and very shiny wooden floor. He talked about actors and shoot schedules, and when I watched a film with him he made me feel part of it by telling me about the continuity or lighting of each shot, and how the casting agent had got the characters just right. When he was away on shoots he'd send me postcards with the cartoon characters he created but I liked it better when he came home. Then Mum was always laughing.

In the summer after we moved from Oxford to Minety, a lot of my parents' friends came to stay, bringing children they'd unpack from their cars. Those children would blink and yawn before vanishing into the depths of the garden with Nell and me to make dens. Mum's friend Candida also came to stay. She and her daughter Lucy drove her horse and cart over, pulled by her skewbald mare, all the way from her house near the Ridgeway.

I knew Candida well because Mum and Rick often took us to her house for lunch with her husband Rupert. They lived in a huge house with their five children, who felt like versions of my brother and sisters. It was an intimidating, beautiful place, with rooms painted in jewel colours and a wide river running through the bottom of the garden. After lunch Candida would usually take us out for a drive along the Ridgeway on one of her carts. She had an elegant dog cart with vast wheels, and a covered wagon painted with all her children's names, but I liked the governess trap best. It had a neat door with a brass handle, through which you would let yourself into the back of the cart, and padded leather seats. Candida let Mum drive me in that cart, and I felt excited by the way the cart bounced along as Candida's pony cantered across one of the fields by her house, although it was scary too, and made me grip harder onto the sides of the cart.

When Candida arrived at Minety on her cart that summer, I watched her in the stable yard as she fetched buckets and sponges so she could wash the sweaty pony down. My jodhpur boots were grubby and my jeans grimy with grease from my pony's saddle, so I was envious of the way Candida managed to deal with the sweat

of her horse but still look beautiful. She wore brown cowboy boots and a long red skirt with a thick leather belt with a gold buckle, which matched the tiny gold heart she wore on a chain around her neck and the gold heart studs in her ears. When she smiled I could see all her teeth and she called me darling, even when she was talking to her horse at the same time.

Rick had made a table using breeze blocks and a trestle top, setting it up under a hazel tree in the garden. Mum and Candida sat in the shade under the light-green leaves of the tree and Mum smoked Silk Cut from a packet my brother had left at the weekend. Candida shook her head when Mum offered her one, saying she thought she'd start again after her dad died, but she hadn't. Mum broke off crumbs from a loaf on the table, waving her hand across the dish of macaroni cheese where flies were buzzing, and threw the crumbs to the chickens scratching nearby. The dogs stretched under the tree, panting in the heavy, late summer heat. Mum and Candida talked about the names of the roses and what herbs Mum might grow and where in the garden would be the best place for a party.

'It's heaven here,' said Candida, stretching her neck backwards so that her blonde hair fell down her back like a silk curtain. 'Complete heaven. I don't want to go anywhere else ever again.'

After Evangeline and then Dash were born, a sense of our home at Minety came rushing back to me with a force that hit me so hard it felt like repeated physical blows. The house came alive again in my mind, even though I hadn't been there since I was eighteen, twenty years before, when the events of the accident were only two years old. I'd shut it away for two decades, but becoming a mother for a third and fourth time magnified it terribly, so that I felt the past and present were competing as places I wanted to be, and the past was always winning. Trying to find Minety in my head turned into postnatal depression, although my friend Virgil has a theory that women succumb to postnatal depression after childbirth because in labour they touch the gaps between life and death.

I am not scared of labour. I love every part of it and, if I could, I'd do it this evening as I'd certainly far rather give birth than have to cook supper. I love the pain, and the exhilaration of holding a slippery new life in my arms, and I even love the feeling of the battering my body's been given in the days afterwards. When I'm giving birth, I feel my role in this life is at its most vivid and precisely defined. There's no smudginess but instead just ecstasy. The slump of postnatal depression was the diametric opposite of this emotional clarity. It was far, far more painful than childbirth, and unlike labour went on for weeks and months, not hours.

When Dash was born, those gaps in between were so vivid that for a moment my mother was in the labour room with me. It was at the moment when my body was resisting the test lying before it. My labours have been successful when I've moved right into them, rather than retreating, but at that moment I was overwhelmed as contractions hit me every few seconds. Clear fluid laced with blood and strings of gunk ran down my thighs as I gripped the edge of the bed. I was scared and crying, my courage deserting me, but in a few empty moments I looked up across the room and suddenly she was there.

'Come across to me,' she said. 'Come across. Come to me.'

She was there in the room, smiling and talking to me as I'd last seen her twenty-two years ago before the accident. I went towards her in my labour and then, with a rush, Dash was arriving, and Mum had gone.

The one thing that did make me feel better, as my life, pixelated with depression, started coming back into focus as Evangeline approached one, was a small white pony called Bliss. We kept her in a segment of damp fields on a farm between the edge of Oxford and the ring road, where buses rushed past beyond a thick black-thorn hedge and fallen-down stables held together with tarpaulin and string. The land was on the green belt, a bucolic echo of a bigger farm long since swallowed up by houses and dual carriageway.

The same family had owned it since the war, running it as a dairy and piggery, but most recently a livery yard where ponies grazed in the fields running down to the Thames with the spikes and spires of Oxford behind them. As a livery yard it struggled, as most people with horses want a floodlit indoor arena for show jumping and proper hacking, neither of which it had, but as a result the grass rent was very cheap.

All summer, my daughter Dolly and I biked through the housing estate with Evangeline in a bike seat, to this haven on the edge of Oxford where I'd teach Dolly how to pick out Bliss's hooves or tie her lead rope into a slip-knot. The ring road rushed past on the far side of the field from the yard, but I found it calming: the tangle of jangled nerves in my head smoothed themselves when I was with my daughters and the ponies. It was familiar, like being at Minety.

Dolly and I found unexpected bridle paths running round the edge of Oxford. I'd lead Dolly around those paths, past hedgerows laden with early green blackberries, and then out into an underpass coloured with graffiti and into the housing estate where we lived, ready to buy sweets at the corner shop.

Once, after Dash had been born, I rode Bliss alone through the fields that bordered the city, even though my legs dangled below her girth. It rained hard: hot, fat drops of English summer drenching my T-shirt as we trotted through a dripping, green landscape north of the city but still within the ring road. Flashes of river appeared behind the bank of nettles running alongside the hawthorn hedges dividing the fields.

I jumped off to drag open a rusting gate, which led to a field of shoulder-high reeds. On the far side of the river I could hear the pulse of urban life, and behind me a police siren tore along the ring road, but the fields were a pocket of wilderness I'd found in the gaps in between. I rode on around the edge of the field, skirting the hedge where fat bumblebees hummed over dog roses, and under the spreading canopy of an oak tree, where four deer sprang out of the rushes, startling their heads to stare at us, making Bliss snort

and prance like a thoroughbred. The deer fled, bouncing away through the reeds, towards the city, so I kicked my pony onwards to canter to the top of the field. There was nowhere else to go. We'd ridden to the edge of the city and the fields had ended at the metal crash of the ring road, where cars sat bumper to bumper in teatime traffic. I'd felt as if I could ride for ever.

But I couldn't ride for ever, because I had to go back home to look after the babies. As I sat feeding Dash with the blinds pulled down against the intense summer heat in our upstairs sitting room, all I could think about was escaping to a place where the ponies and the outside world could be part of our lives all the time, not just something we visited.

Outside, the sound of Jimmy and Dolly's laughter carried up to the sitting room above, but I didn't hear it. All I heard was the muted suckling of my child. All I saw were the walls shutting me in. I couldn't breathe.

Before that summer was over, we went to Wales. Oxford was dull with heat as life flattened into the shapeless morph of August. In the suburbs, boys, stripped to their shorts, sat on garden walls drinking Lucozade and smoking in the shade. The glass separating me from my children and from my life was now so familiar I couldn't even remember what it felt like to be present. In the back of the car, Jimmy and Dolly argued over my iPhone, as Dash mewed in his car seat. I switched on the radio to cover the sound of the children, pulling dark glasses over my eyes that were fixed on the road.

Three hours later, the diamond brilliance of rain on bright emerald hills greeted us. I opened the window, cold air rushing into the hot cocoon, and I felt a throb of unfamiliar energy – enthusiasm, even – dart through me, like the hills before us had sprung open, showing me their elemental heart.

We stayed in a slate-grey cottage surrounded by green. At night it was deep dark: Jimmy and Dolly slept together in a single bed, and the skylight above them was a square of silver stars pricking

holes in an onyx sky. We had a picnic at Raglan Castle and, on the advice of a guidebook, one rainy day we went to Brecon to go to the local butcher. The shop had a door made of strips of striped plastic and displayed green pieces of plastic parsley between the mincemeat and rows of sausages. There was a corkboard on one wall, covered with photographs of local events: a man doing a thumbs-up to the camera at a classic-car display sat beside images of a school fete and a handful of pictures of a local gymkhana; children beaming into the camera, rosettes tucked into the sides of their ponies' bridles as parents looked on.

I studied the pictures as the butcher made a joke about the weather. Dash struggled in his sling on my front, and I kissed his soft head, catching sight of the butcher's blade as it flashed through slabs of red meat. I watched, but looked away quickly as the butcher wiped his hands in red streaks on the front of his white overalls.

'Well, you know what they say about the weather in Wales?' the man asked, in an accent that took his voice in surprising directions. 'If you don't like it, wait a bit, then see what happens.'

He smiled, handing me the change, as if it was all so obvious.

We cooked the lamb steaks on a disposable barbeque beside a stretch of river near Brecon. We'd waited long enough and the butcher was right: the rain stopped, revealing a wet landscape, which blinked as if astonished to find itself bathed in clear afternoon light. The grass was drenched – too wet to sit on – but Jimmy and Dolly happily played tag in the field as Evangeline crouched down to watch me light the barbeque, the coals turning white as Dash slept in his buggy.

Jimmy and Dolly's voices bounced back to me across the field as they climbed on a gate where some ponies were grazing. The steaks fizzed on the flames; when I lifted them from the metal grill, they were criss-crossed with black marks. As Evangeline played with some buttercups in the grass, Dash woke up, gnawing on his wrists, oblivious to anything but the moment. I pulled my denim jacket

off to use as a blanket to sit on as I watched the steaks colouring and then sliced the white loaf and cucumber we'd bought in Brecon. On the far side of the field, my elder children moved around in my vision, laughing as they leant over the gate to look at the ponies, and sunlight dazzled. And, for the first time in months, the glassy sadness trapping me was gone and a stillness sat in my head instead.

The butcher had been right. The field, the fire, the ponies and the glassy brilliance of the wet landscape. I needed the children to live like this, not just for a few days on holiday, but for their whole childhoods. It all seemed so clear now.

I lifted the steaks off the flames, setting them aside on the cardboard wrapping of the barbeque. Jimmy and Dolly had moved on around the edge of the field, ignoring my calls to come back to eat. Taking Evangeline's hand, I left Dash staring into the grass in his buggy to walk with my youngest daughter through the long, thick, wet grass to where the three ponies grazed.

The grey pony lifted its head, mid-chew, a thick fringe of mane obscuring its eyes. It watched Evangeline and me for a moment, then went back to the grass. Along the hedge line, Jimmy waved to us, so that Evangeline disentangled her hand from mine and ran away from me towards her elder brother and sister.

I rested my forearms across the top of the gate, laying my head sideways on my arms, and closed my eyes. There was no sound, no birdsong: nothing except the rushing of blood in my head and the silent pressure of the ponies, heads down, working their way through their grazing. The top of the metal gate felt cool against my palms and the warm air made my breathing deepen. The deep green of the landscape enveloped me, so that time moved backwards and instead of my own children on the far side of the field, I saw myself, in a flash, as a child, walking beside Mum on a green hill with a white chalk track running ahead of us.

I opened my eyes, turning my face to the sky and the red kite, which wheeled around, an endless spin of energy way up there beyond my reach, like a thread of life looping me out of this present moment from my children and back to Mum; and back further

beyond her too, into a past I didn't know and yet was so strongly a part of that it was within me all the time.

Five months later, we left the city and I moved back to the country. We found a green hill, just outside Oxford in a village called Baulking, beneath the shadow of the Ridgeway near Uffington, where an ancient chalk horse galloped across the hill beyond the bedroom window.