



# Introduction

*I go down to the shore in the morning  
and depending on the hour the waves  
are rolling in or moving out,  
and I say, oh, I am miserable,  
what shall—  
what should I do? And the sea says  
in its lovely voice:  
Excuse me, I have work to do.*

Mary Oliver

This story happened by accident. I never expected, or wanted, to live a life on the land. But then fate took me there and taught me lessons I never knew I needed to learn.

Some people tell me that having farming in my family means it must be in my blood. Maybe they are right. This book is, in part, my journey to find out. First, I had to decide what being a farmer meant. To do that I had to find out what being a farmer used to mean, what it now means and what it will mean in the future. In doing so, I met others asking themselves the same questions. This book weaves their stories around mine. Some of those farmers – like Tom, Rebecca and Stuart – are still

discovering the answers. Others – like Ollie, Sam and George – found them long ago. Like many of the farmers in this book, to find my future I had to go back to my past. So that story – the story of my grandparents’ farm – is the first that you will read.

As I made this journey, I came across a revolution: a way of farming that is both new and also very old, and which asks us to look at our history, our future and our values differently. It is a revolution that might just abate a climate crisis, a physical and mental health crisis, and a biodiversity crisis too. It could help to regenerate our land while also giving us some of the answers so many city dwellers seem to be looking for, not just about connection but about how to live. In doing so, it can teach us a different way of being.

I found myself in this world at the beginning of one of the greatest upheavals in farming for generations. Brexit has separated the United Kingdom from Europe, and so too from the Common Agricultural Payments that have supported food production for so long. Now these public subsidies are being withdrawn. One third of all UK farms make a loss without them.<sup>1</sup> Farmers will now be granted public money for looking after land that many accuse them of wrecking, and not for growing the food they define themselves by. Food is no longer seen as a public good, but as a public given. This shift in mission is both huge and difficult, because farming is more than just a job. It is an identity. Everything about it must be seen through this prism. It is not just how farmers spend their days that is changing. It is who they are.

Because the devolved nations of the United Kingdom are planning their futures slightly differently, I have focused on English farmers in this book, although farmers all over the world are facing the same battles – mental, financial and environmental – that lie within these stories. The change in government policy has made English farmers a test case: how we define farming now may alter the way others come to see it around the globe.

Some of the farmers in this book do not want a part in public life save for their stories to be better understood, so I have changed their names and identifying details to protect their anonymity. However, the people in this book are real and so are their stories, their views, their experiences, their heartbreaks and their joys. I use each farmer's exact words where I am able, and what I know of them, their lives, their expressions and opinions to narrate the rest where I am not.

It is important to be clear that this book is not an anthology of farming. It cannot be. Every farmer will do something different from their neighbour. But while their methods and produce may change, the themes that run throughout their lives and their farms are often the same. This journey has taken me around the country speaking to farmers from every walk of life who are farming in many different ways, on varying soils and on land with diverse histories. They have trusted me with their diaries, old correspondence, home movies and photographs. They have confided moments of pain and joy. More than one has cried at the relief of unburdening themselves. I have learned a lot from every one of them.

But this journey has meant more than the gathering of knowledge. It has involved an understanding, not just of the world around me – although it certainly taught me to look at things differently – but also of myself. I had placed a learned emphasis on certain things and on certain people. I ended up in the countryside seeking a break from reality. Instead, I ended up finding it.



*You have to take a view that everything  
happens for a reason.*

*You wouldn't be doing what you're  
doing now if that hadn't happened.*

Rebecca, farmer

## 1. The Beginning – Butter and Honey and Dust

It is the smell that makes me think of him: butter and honey and dust. It comes from the meadow field, which is separated from our cottage garden by a wooden fence. I lean against the fence and inhale. In a few weeks' time these meadow grasses will be cut. They will be bundled into great cylinders, each one rolling out of the red and rusty baler. I will shout to my two young sons to come and see its cleverness. Wilfred, nearly three years old, will run barefoot, whippet fast, and behind him my husband, Ben, will carry our ten-month-old baby. Together we will line up against the fence and watch. Each time the machine stops, quivers, and births a bale we cheer.

Now, though, on this evening in the east of England, the scent of the uncut hay hangs in the air. Behind me, inside the cottage we have just moved into, are bags and boxes waiting to be unpacked. We have only brought essentials with us. We don't plan on being here long. But I don't want to go inside. I want to be here on the edge of a meadow, wondering about this new life we are about to make, which looks and feels so very different from the one we have just left.

Wilfred climbs up the broken gate in the middle of the fence and sits on it, his legs either side of the top bar. His brother pulls himself up on the lower rung,



grizzling because he is still too small to do the same. They are clean and pink from their bath. I look at them and try to remember how it feels to be that small, with bare feet and limbs and nostrils filled with the scent of butter and honey and dust.

I close my eyes to better see the man who belonged to that smell. I can feel the sensation of hugging him as clearly as if it had just happened, his tweed jacket rough against my cheek. My grandfather was an oak of a man: six foot four inches tall with huge farmer's hands and a distrust of deodorant. He smelled of body and masculinity and of the earth. His face had seen all the seasons, brown as brick, cracked with lines. He had a thick black moustache and his trouser waist was always high; his back always straight. Like others of his time and occupation he was, I think, suspicious of sentiment. After he died we discovered dozens of small notebooks into which he had occasionally written life events alongside his records of the Hampshire farm where he lived and worked. On the day my mother, his eldest child, was born, he wrote of my grandmother, 'Dina calved. Heifer calf.'

But I also remember what his face looked like each time he saw me. I was his eldest grandchild from his eldest child, and when he sat down I would climb up his giant frame to make him read me stories. The ones he read had rabbit heroes, even though he loved to lean out of his farmhouse bedroom window and shoot the real ones to death. Once, long before I was born, he nearly hit a rambler too, missing him by a few inches and sparing himself a charge of manslaughter. But the land

the man was walking on was not my grandfather's to *get off*. It never would be. My grandfather was a tenant farmer. The fields he worked and the home he lived in were rented. They did not belong to him and never would. What he did, how he lived, his work and legacy, had to be enough for a lifetime's security and achievement and pride. And, back then, it was.

My grandparents' farm and the freedoms it offered me and my two younger sisters punctuated our lives. With three children aged under four and the farm less than twenty minutes' drive away, my mother sought out its refuge often. It was the backdrop to nearly every weekend and school holiday. Once, for several months, it became our home. Farming wove its way around my childhood not just because of the farm and the farming friends my mother had grown up with but because of my father's job as a land agent. As a child, all I understood of his job was that he spent his days talking to farmers and landowners and kept wellingtons and a wax jacket in the boot of his car, which made it smell always of the outdoors. But, without my really noticing it, the markers of the rural calendar became the markers of my childhood. Agricultural shows, harvest teas, point-to-points, shoots. Ploughing time, planting time, lambing time, harvest time. Bullocks and bulls; calves and lambs. Spring cuckoos; blackberry picking; winter sloes.

This world was familiar, and I therefore took its education and its access entirely for granted. It was only when I grew to know those who had not had it that I truly understood both my luck and its gifts. That is to say,

I grew up unafraid of the countryside and the people in it. I was not afraid of the animals or of the machines. I was not afraid of nature, red in tooth and claw. I was not afraid of either death or killing, by which I mean I was – mostly – not afraid of life, for they are both part of the same circle. But only now, when I am standing at the edge of a Suffolk meadow, do I understand that all these fragments of rural life have collected together to make something substantial. They have formed an imprint, a blueprint, waiting for me to need it.

Now I do need it. We are living next to a meadow by accident. I had no dreams of a life on the land. I had loved my life because it was in the city, and I love cities. I was born at the beginning of the 1980s, a decade defined by individualism, commercialism, capitalism, The City. I knew I wanted to be one of the women in the films I watched, always marching down a crowded pavement swinging a briefcase, wearing stilettos and shoulder pads. I wanted to be what that image meant: clever and powerful and important. Everything I saw and heard told me a city was the only place with people worth listening to. I had absorbed a truth that said, for your life to matter, for it to be of value, for your voice to be heard, you could not live where people's voices were soft. I moved to London as soon as I could.

I loved how arrogant and fast and extreme and anonymous it was. I would wonder at how, at any given moment, even when I was asleep, there was someone just metres away from me whom I would never know. City life had a thousand different distractions: the

current of life was turned up to full wattage, day and night. Like disco lights, there were people always streaming past to catch my eye, even if none of them looked back. City air hung heavy with urgency. Sometimes I felt that it charged me up. My every sense – smell, sight, hearing, taste, touch – was stimulated, so that I learned to dull my perceptions a little in order not to be overloaded. It took a while for me to realize that it could sometimes be hard, after so much noise, to really hear.

I married, had children and put my work as a criminal and family barrister on hold to care for our new baby and toddler, and to write. In 2017 we bought our first family home, an unloved wreck in south London with missing ceilings and stairs which had long been left empty, marketed by estate agents as desperate as we were. But then, at the start of the summer, Ben lost his job and our life swivelled on its axis. We decided to move out of London as we made our new, uninhabitable home safe to live in. We would go to Suffolk, where Ben grew up, and rent a cottage near his parents. I could finish my first book and we could try to work out what to do next. It would be a respite from upheaval. A break from real life.

We packed up the place in London that we had been renting and put its contents into storage. Wedding-present china. Coffee-table books. Lawyer suits. Candlesticks. The Nespresso machine. A glass-topped dining table. The debris of modern urban life was interned in a colossal warehouse in north London. We told the storage company we would come and collect it

in six months when we moved back. Except we won't. For, as though to make certain of the impossibility of doing so, the storage facility then burned down with our things inside it. The fire lasted for three days. It took 120 firefighters to put it out. Fate clearly wanted the job done properly.

In six short weeks the life I had been leading for so long has been upturned. Now I am standing in the garden of our new home wondering why I am there.

In front of me the meadow field and the two other pasture fields that lie beyond it spread out in an echo of their early pre-eighteenth-century enclosure boundary. Our cottage lies in a valley full of gentle slopes in one of England's flattest counties, cut through with a river. The land here is arable country: filled with crop fields of many hundred acres and soils that range from free-draining sandy loams to heavy clay. The three pasture fields in front of me belong to Ben's family, bought up bit by bit over the last ten years. Together with three crop fields nearby, they form a small farm that has, up until now, been managed at one remove by owners rather than farmers. But now we are here. Jobless. A little lost. A little bruised. So while we work things out we will take on the running of this farm, just for a few months while I finish writing my first book and Ben looks for other work. Afterwards, I wonder whether there is another reason we ask to do it. Looking after this land might give us a way to feel grounded when life as we know it has been uprooted.

The sky begins to slash into ribbons of pink and I

realize how late it must be. I pick the children up, one under each arm, cross and squirming because they don't want to go inside either. After I have settled them into bed I leave them with Ben, then walk back out of the cottage and into the garden alone. I feel like I need to be outside. I need to try and think and better work out why we are here and what the future holds.

The grass and clover feel cool under my feet. The air is filled with the low bass line of distant combine harvesters and the sound of birds chattering their way to bed. Butterflies and tiny brown and white moths dance over the tips of the meadow's long grass. I lean against the fence and watch a gang of swallows dart and skim and dive, arrows of blue-black, the white of their breast feathers flashing at me as they pitch and swerve to snatch insects in mid-air. They are so fast I think they must be swifts, because I have not looked carefully at either bird since I was a child and it is only later that I begin to learn how to tell the two apart. Standing, watching them, another memory returns. Sitting on the grass outside the back of my grandparents' farmhouse on a summer's evening like this. My grandmother shelling peas, grown by my grandfather, into a stoneware bowl. I sit next to her. Above us comes the *scree, scree* call of swifts. My grandmother points to the sky as they dart around the eaves of the farmhouse, in the same place bats would fly in the evening. I try to see them but they are a blur: too high and fast. Over a lifetime those swifts will have flown far enough to have made it to the moon and back five times. They have eaten, drunk, mated and slept in flight,

a fact so beyond comprehension that it was not until an airman during the First World War shut off his engine 10,000 feet above the ground to glide silently above the enemy, and then found himself amidst the sleeping birds, that we believed it.<sup>1</sup> I watch the swallows skim the meadow fields, still then unsure if they are swifts or not, and I think of how the life I have just left behind could sometimes feel like that. Eating, drinking and mating in flight, my feet never touching the ground. Until now.

We have moved from somewhere that felt like the middle of everything to somewhere that feels like the middle of nowhere. We have been blown into this new life by a storm we had not seen coming. The storm has plucked us up like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* and spat us out on the edge of a field into a life very different from the one we had before. The news is full of snap election results, of Brexit, of Trump, of Russian interference in elections, of North Korean missile testing and Syrian chemical weapons, of London terrorist attacks, of Grenfell burning. It feels like the world is being torn down its seams at the same time as our family life has been. But this new life has an echo of one I had once known. Except – like the Scarecrow, Lion and Tin Man – the people, machines and landscapes in it are both very familiar yet also completely changed from how I remember them.

On the horizon, the wide-open sky washes twilight blue. In front of me, the meadow field slopes gently up, then down and away again, rising on the other side into a line of trees. Now, in the dusk, their silhouettes look like

a woodcut. From where I now stand I can see the combine harvester in the field on the other side of the valley, divided from us by river and road. I wonder who is driving the combine, and whether they own the land they are working on, and, if not, whether they even know who does. I think of how, in the city, we hold two contrasting pictures of a farmer: one from a children's picture book and one from a poster of ecological destruction. I wonder whether either of these cartoons is true any longer. I wonder if anyone knows what being a farmer means any more. I need to find out because now, unexpectedly, I have been given the chance to become one and I am starting to think I might want to take it.

As I watch the combine cross back and forth, I am struck by the simple truth that farmers have worked and shaped the land I'm looking at for thousands of years. Beyond these fields it might feel as though the planet is beginning to fall apart. Our own small world may feel like it's already fallen apart. But, as I stand and watch, I feel something reassuring in the thought that crops will be sown, crops will grow and crops will be harvested, no matter what chaos lies beyond them. I am about to become a small link in this long chain. The decisions and actions we will take on this land will bind us not just to those who will come after, but also to those who came before. It is not my land and it is not the place that I grew up, but maybe, I think, this does not matter. Maybe I can learn this land and grow roots here. I do not know then that, in fact, the method will work the other way round. The land will teach me about myself and,



somehow, it will grow itself into me. Something that I thought was an end is about to turn into a beginning.

I stare out at the meadow field thinking about all that has passed and all that is to come. Then, suddenly, from the edge of my sightline, a white barn owl swoops. It is huge, its wings stretched wider than I ever knew they could be. I instinctively reach for my phone to photograph it then realize I have left it inside. The owl floats noiselessly towards and away from me, towards and away again, then returns into the copse of trees in the far left corner of the meadow. I wait, holding my breath. Then it flies back out and straight at me, close enough for me to think I might be under attack. When it is a few metres away it pulls to a halt, pulses in the air for a few wing beats, then throws itself down into the meadow. I can see only the glowing white of its back fringed by tall grasses. When it rises, its small fat quarry is clamped in its talons. It lands on a fence post only a few metres to my left. I keep my body as still as I can and turn my head to watch it. The sound of cracking bones rings out into the evening air as it finishes its kill. Then it turns and looks straight at me with its whole head, its dark eyes locked on mine. My ears rush with the noise of my heart thumping blood around my body. I feel as if I cannot breathe. Being seen by this creature feels like being allowed into a secret world. The sensation of it makes my skin prickle. Then, in one motion, the owl takes flight back towards the copse, its prey in its talons and the evening sky behind it.

I let out my breath over the meadow and with it more

than the novelty of what I have just seen. I breathe out the uncertainty of our life, my worry about the stability of our own small family and our small country. I inhale the smell of butter and honey and dust and wonder what my grandfather would think about the fact that I now find myself not in a courtroom, but on the land.

I don't yet know what the future holds for this farm in Suffolk, nor what it holds for my grandparents' farm either. My uncle, who has taken over their tenancy and now works the land, finds himself with an inheritance very different from my grandfather's. I have read that over 10,000 farms will go under in the next ten years. His farm – my grandparents' old farm – may be one of them. If it is, I wonder what parts of me will be lost with it, for that farm helped form the blueprint of who I am, and it is this blueprint that might just enable me to sink new roots into new land on the other side of the country from where my grandfather once sank his own.

My grandfather, Peter, was considered a hero who fed a starving nation. Now his son Charlie, my uncle, is considered a villain, blamed for ecological catastrophe and with a legacy no one wants. The story of their farm is also the story of farming. It tells us about farming's past and how and why it changed in just a few short decades into something so very different. But their story might tell us something else too. It might tell us the story of farming's future.

*These are complicated stories,  
they are nuanced stories,  
and they are being told in a binary world.*

Sarah, farmer

## 2. Peter and Charlie

The field is small by modern standards, just twelve acres. It is called Englands, which is fitting, for its size and shape mean it could belong to few other countries than its namesake. At its base lies a small copse, which, in autumn, burns every shade of red, yellow, orange and brown. The colours of its leaves are so bright that they can be seen like a torch flame from the bedroom window at the front of the farmhouse opposite.

The field is the start of a farm that rolls down into the valley, its boundary shaped like a boot. Nine hundred and twenty acres of land split into thirty fields, two woods, three cottages, a yard, barns, a red-bricked farmhouse and a road that runs down the farm's middle. Not one of its fields is square and few are flat. Some who know it say this is difficult land – 'bloody difficult land' – to farm. Its soil can turn from sticky clay in the morning to dry and impenetrable earth by the afternoon. In a wet autumn some fields will lie waterlogged for weeks. Flints work their way to the surface with such regularity that the men who once laboured here swore that the stones must be alive, growing up out of the soil like the crops they harvested. It harbours several Bronze Age burial barrows, the source of a river and the debris of farming's history – ploughshares, horseshoes as big as dinner

plates – buried in its soil. It is a place so special that, when I am at school and asked to write about somewhere important to me, it is this farm that I choose.

It was September 1959 when the farm tenancy last changed hands from one family to another. It happened, as it always does, on the 29th of the month at Michaelmas: one of the quarter days that fall close to a solstice or equinox and divide the year into four. Michaelmas marked the end of the season of bounty and the beginning of a new cycle of farming, and so it became the date for new beginnings: for legal, school and university terms, when new magistrates were elected, servants hired and rents became due. And so it became the date new farm tenancies began.

On that Michaelmas Day in 1959, the new tenant, Peter, drives up the steep and narrow hill that leads from the road to the farmhouse, sweeping his car left then right. He passes cottages, a field, then reaches a long red-brick wall on his left and, on his right, a sloping field with a copse burning shades of crimson at its base. At the end of the wall he stops, turns sharply left and drives into the farmyard. Later that day he will write in his diary, ‘Afternoon took car to garage. Got Land Rover. Evening to Hinton.’

Peter needs a Land Rover because this is now his farm. He had been born to farm, but born without one. As a boy he spent the holidays away from the suburbs of his childhood with an unmarried aunt, whose farm he fell in love with. By his teens he had a morning milking round in a dairy. By the time the war began to grumble,

a farming apprenticeship. In the late summer of 1939, when Michaelmas was near and autumn had arrived again in her layers of red and gold, he watched the boys and men go off to war but knew he had a different calling. His war work must take place in a field without a battle in it.

This tenancy, then, is a dream now realized. Each part of this farm will become his, and he will become part of it in every way but law, for he will never own it.<sup>1</sup> The farmhouse and land around it belong to the squire who lives in the big house with the towering metal gates, which rules over its domain from the top of the valley.

For twenty-five years this farm has been worked by a man whose height is as sizable as his stomach. Doug Reid, six foot two inches tall and dressed in leather gaiters and an overcoat with odd buttons, lives in only a few of the rooms in the farmhouse, unmarried and child-free. He has been looked after by a local housekeeper and eleven farm workers, who are to be passed along to Peter with this new tenancy. Doug Reid has limped on through the two decades that have decimated other farms. The Great Depression, which began in the USA in the 1930s, rolled its way around the world like a tidal wave to countries already depleted by war, culling Britain's world trade by half. Times were so bad that by the start of the Second World War in 1939, so many farmers had gone out of business that Britain was importing 70 per cent of its food.<sup>2</sup> When the war began, food became an easy target. Submarines sank the boats shipping it to Britain and blockaded the Atlantic Ocean as

the Nazis tried to starve Britain into surrender. There was little option: the country had to find its way back to food production. *Ploughing on farms is as vital as arms!* The slogan worked. Six million acres of meadow grassland were ploughed up to grow cereals.<sup>3</sup> But by the time the war ended in 1945, three-quarters of the food consumed by the people of Britain was produced there. Some say this helped the Allies win the war.

Through all this Doug Reid hung on, scraping by, somehow avoiding the farm's requisition by the government during the war and seeing it into better days. Inside the farmhouse, though, little has changed since Victorian times. The primitive kitchen has a well for water and a hole in its roof big enough to see the sky through. The only heating comes from the fireplaces. The lavatory is outside on scrubland that cannot yet be called a garden.

But now it is 1959, and Michaelmas, and time for a change. Peter is two inches taller than Doug and his belly is flat and firm. A local journalist will later write, 'The tall debonair Peter Flindt could easily have been a film star if he hadn't taken to farming at such an early age.' It must have been the black moustache that did it.

This is not the only change. Farming is about to boom. Wartime farming subsidies and government grants have become peacetime policy. It is the beginning of advances in agricultural technology, machinery, seeds, pesticides and fertilizers that will result in astonishing efficiency and productivity, lifting millions out of starvation.<sup>4</sup> Those who invent the process by which artificial

nitrogen is made – Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch – have long ago been awarded Nobel Prizes. Wartime chemicals designed to kill humans are diluted and sold as insecticides. Small meadows filled with hundreds of species of wildflowers and plants are no longer needed to feed the horses that once pulled the ploughs now they have been replaced by machines. Those meadows that survived the war are reseeded with crops or hardy ryegrass and artificially fertilized, which means that the wildflowers – which will thrive only in low-fertility soil – don't grow back. In the end, 97 per cent of all Britain's wildflower meadows are lost.<sup>5</sup> Many of the hedgerows that divide the fields, some dating back to the Bronze Age, are taken out to make room for crops. Wetlands are drained and rivers straightened. Trees are removed in their thousands: after all, farmers grow food, not oaks.

This year – the year that Peter arrives on the farm – is a tipping point of change, of growth, of revolution. This will become a year which will tell us about our future. The first satellite picture of Earth is transmitted from space. The Caspian tiger in Iran is killed. The first known human death from HIV occurs in the Congo. In the USA, the first commercial photocopier is launched. So is Barbie.

A few days later, on Saturday 3 October 1959, Peter returns to his new farm in his new Land Rover to start his new life. Next to him sits his wife. In the back, alongside her two siblings – for the brother who will one day work this farm has not yet been born – sits a six-year-old girl. Two decades later, this girl will become my mother.

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On Peter's new farm, like farms all over the country, life revolves around food. After all, that's what a farm is for. The country only ended rationing five years earlier, nearly a decade after peace was declared. The low-slung fear of starvation is on everybody's mind long after wasting food stops being a criminal offence. Hunger is real. It is tangible and frightening and utterly possible. Fear of it lies within all those who knew it. For the rest of their lives they will treat food with care and respect. They will swill the milk bottle with water to get every last drop. They will cut ham when it has grown cold so as to get thinner slices. Food scraps will be fed to chickens, geese, pigs or whatever other animal will eat them. They will save the fat after cooking meat and the dripping will sit pale and slimy in a stoneware bowl, waiting to be reused. Those who want to cook with olive oil must buy it from the chemist. Avocados are foreign; holidays are not.

On Peter's farm, every kind of vegetable is grown in the garden, and fruit in a cage.<sup>6</sup> Raspberries, strawberries, black and red currants and gooseberries are eaten when they ripen, until the purchase of a freezer means they can be kept for winter too. Fruit trees are planted and grow into an orchard. Leftover pears and plums are stewed and frozen. The apples are laboriously laid out on newspaper in the cool of the cellar so that the air smells sweet and fermented, each fruit set down carefully to ensure a rotten one cannot touch its neighbour and spoil it. Scraps of meat are minced and turned into cottage pie for the coming days. In autumn, braces of pheasants hang on the back door and more in the cellar,

waiting to be gutted and plucked. The entrails of a rabbit are regularly laid across the kitchen table as its flesh is made ready for a pie. Milk comes from a neighbouring dairy farmer, who appears every other morning with his churn and stamps muddy boots across the kitchen and into the scullery, where he pours fresh milk into a huge bowl. Afterwards the cream is skimmed off the top and two wooden pats brushed back and forth to turn it into butter. Eggs come from the chickens who scratch and peck amongst the orchard, while elsewhere in the country oversized barns begin to be built with cages for their cousins.

The farmhouse table hosts four meals a day, the large helmet of the village police officer when he calls for tea, neighbouring farmers, grain merchants, sales reps and the vicar. In a day it will see a cooked breakfast, a two-course lunch, tea with sandwiches and at least two home-made cakes before supper comes around again. There is enough food; more than enough. But they will still remember the hunger.

When he arrives in the farmyard in 1959, Peter's job, and therefore his purpose, and therefore his identity, is clear. The country – hell, the world – needs him to grow as much food as he can, in whatever way he can. His government will pay him to do it. His community will admire him for doing it. His mission is set.

He will produce beef and crops in the fields that sweep down into the valley from the farmhouse where he and his family live. Three-day-old calves will arrive in the calf pens and my mother will teach them to drink from a

bucket of milk, their sucking reflexes pulling her small milk-covered fingers into their mouths. From January to May, eighty calves are sheltered from the winter in the calf pens and yard opposite the farmhouse, then let out into the fields when the spring warmth comes. They are fattened on the pasture around the farmhouse and sold for beef when they are two years old. Unlike the cows Peter once milked there are now too many for them to be given names. These cows have numbers instead.

In the decades after Peter arrives in Hinton Ampner, farming is regulation free. There is hardly a form to fill out or a permission to be granted. Hedges can be trimmed whenever they look untidy and not just when the birds nesting in them have fledged and flown, so my mother will collect their eggs on cycle rides, pricking one end with a needle and blowing out their contents. Whatever is unwanted is buried or burned or thrown away. An old pit is filled up with load after load of chalk after a chance encounter with a full lorry looking for a landfill site brings the two happily together. This buries not just the dell but all the rubbish thrown into it by the villagers who have, for decades, viewed it as their local rubbish tip. Keys are left where they are useful – in the ignition or in the door – and no one turns them who is not supposed to. There are men with clipboards, but they only appear to encourage Peter to grow more and more, for that is what is wanted. And so even a tenant farmer can have the sense that his position is secure: he is to grow food for the nation and he may do so in whatever way he pleases.

Farm life is free and unconstrained. It can also be hard and dangerous. Death is everywhere. On a neighbouring farm, the family's teenage son falls from a top loader onto the barn's concrete floor and is killed. Part of a farm worker's finger is lost in the tip of the combine and the children scramble in the straw to find it before packing it in ice and driving it and its owner to the hospital to be sewn back on. When someone sets fire to a barn and the asbestos sheets on the roof explode, everyone gathers around to watch the sparks fly. The Land Rover, with a top speed of forty miles per hour, has pockets filled not just with baler twine but enough rat-poisoning-cyanide to kill a curious child. Unwanted stray farm kittens are rounded up, dropped into a cloth sack and drowned. Nests of baby field-mice are thrown into the fire and, in the spring, rooks' nests are shotgunned down with the fledglings inside them to stop them feeding on the growing crops. And, alongside everything, there remains the spectre of debt in a world where cash flows often do not keep pace with overdrafts and bills. A local farmer, driven mad by it, shoots dead his wife and son and daughter before taking his own life on the same day another of the children is due to visit them.

Harvest is the climax of the year's work. If the weather is bad, doors are slammed and swear words muttered as the children cower out of the way, lest they be blamed for the bad luck. But when tea-time comes each afternoon, rugs and jam sandwiches are spread out over the field stubble. The farm workers drink cold tea in glass

bottles prepared early in the morning and the children use the hollow stems of the straw to drink hot tea from thermos flasks.

All four children are needed for the long harvest days – an expectation so culturally rooted that our school terms remain based around it, regardless of how few families now send their children to help in the fields. But even when the children are old enough to find work elsewhere – behind a bar or typing the letters of a man in a suit – they still choose to come back for summer work. When my mother turns seventeen, she is allocated to corn carting at harvest time. Sometimes she drives the cabbless tractor wearing only a bandana and a bikini because it is the 1970s, and one must therefore never miss an opportunity to tan.

If the straw is not baled and stored until winter then it is then burned, along with the stubble. The children light a sheaf at one corner and, once it is aflame, run along the side of the field lighting the rest of the straw as they go. They dash away from the whirligigs that twist and speed across the field, their shape made visible by the burning straw in their vortex. The fire is thrilling and powerful and so hot it splinters the flints on the ground's surface. Peter is careful in his timing and method: it might cost him his tenancy if the fire gets out of control. There is a controlled break in the middle to draw the two fires towards one another, and keep the burn within a specified area. It doesn't always work. My aunt, employed on another farm in the summer holidays, finds a sudden change of wind has her running for her life, a