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My Animals and Other Family

Written by Clare Balding

Published by Viking

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My Animals and Other Family

CLARE BALDING

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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

For Alice

Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul
remains unawakened

– Anatole France

Contents

1	Candy	1
2	Mill Reef	13
3	Valkyrie	23
4	Bertie	34
5	Flossy	44
6	Volcano	56
7	Barney	72
8	Frank	90
9	Hattie	107
10	Ellie May	125
11	Lily	139
12	Quirk and Stuart	151
13	Henry	162
14	Ross Poldark	176
15	Mailman	193
16	Knock Knock	208
17	Waterlow Park	219
18	Song of Sixpence	231
19	Respectable Jones	243
	Epilogue	254
	Acknowledgements	257

1

Candy



The first face I can remember seeing was Candy's. She was my protector and my companion, my nanny and my friend. A strong, snuffling, steady presence.

I looked into her big brown eyes, pushed my pudgy fingers into her cavernous wrinkles and smelt her stale breath. It was an all-in sensory experience. I was home.

I pulled her ears, lifted back her lip to examine her tiny teeth and gripped her rolls of fat, but she never snapped, never growled, never even gave me a warning glare. Candy was a saint and she knew her role in life. She was put on earth to guard me and she would, to the end of her days.

Candy was my mother's boxer, and the pecking order was clear – in terms of affection and attention, Candy came first and anyone else, new baby included, came second. Candy loved my mother without question and my mother needed that from someone, even if it was 'only' a dog.

Candy was what they call a red-and-white boxer: a deep-chestnut colour in her body, with a white chest, white around her neck and across her face. Her eyes sagged, her titties swung low and loose and her girth was wider than was strictly desirable. But as far as my mother and I were concerned, Ursula Andress could move aside – she had nothing on Candy.

When she was excited, Candy's whole body showed it. The move started in her stub of a tail and proceeded to her hips, which would rotate from side to side, making it virtually impossible for her to walk. Her body shook with delight and her lips drew back in an unmistakable grin. Most of the time she was rather matronly and sensible, but when she was happy, she was delirious.

I adored her and she responded with an immediate, unquestioning sense of duty. She would lie by my side, move if I moved and allow herself to be a living, breathing baby-walker as I used her to climb to my feet, wobbling on my plump, short legs as she pulled me gently forward. When the strain got too much and I collapsed on to a nappy-cushioned backside, she would sit and wait for me to get going again. She didn't much like other people coming near me, particularly men, warning them off with a withering glare.

Candy seemed to be the only one who was pleased to get to know me. The day that I first came back from hospital, Mum put the basket down on the floor and left me there. Bertie, the aloof lurcher with pretensions to grandeur, had a quick sniff, cocked his leg on the side of the basket and demonstrated exactly what he thought of it all. He stuck his head in the air and walked off, never to give me a second glance.

Candy, on the other hand, planted herself next to me, and there she stayed. It was a comfort, now I think about it, that she was so protective. You see, I was a disappointment from the minute I popped out, and there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

'Oh,' said Grandma, a woman routinely described as 'formidable', 'it's a girl. Never mind, you'll just have to keep trying.'

Robust and six feet tall, my grandmother was a daunting presence. Her hair, neither long nor short, was 'done' once a week by a woman called Wendy, who came to the house. Grandma wore no make-up, believing it to be 'for tarts and prostitutes'. Her favoured formal uniform for race days was a raw-silk dress and matching coat, tailor-made to accommodate her unfeasibly large bosom, and non-patterned, because patterns accentuated the mountains. Sensible court shoes, a spacious handbag to hold wallet, glasses, diary and binoculars, the outfit topped off with a matching beret or – in the summer – a silk turban-style hat.

During the week Grandma would wear a calf-length skirt with a plain-coloured polo neck or cardigan. She never wore trousers. Once upon a time she had been a competent horsewoman, but she gave up riding when the side-saddle was discarded. She refused to countenance the idea of riding 'astride' and did not approve of women wearing jodhpurs.

She didn't much approve of women, full stop, especially women with 'ideas above their station'.

Grandma came from a family of statesmen, prime ministers and patriarchs. Her grandfather was the 17th Earl of Derby, but, as the daughter of his daughter, she would inherit little more than a nice collection of jewellery and a strong sense of entitlement. Her childhood had been split between a town house in London, an estate at Knowsley on the outskirts of Liverpool (now Knowsley Safari Park) and a villa in the south of France. Her mother, Lady Victoria Stanley, had died in a hunting accident when Grandma was just seven years old. Perhaps that accounted for her lack of maternal instinct.

None of the children got much attention, but the boys at least had the advantage of registering a presence. For the one girl in the line-up, early life was a losing battle.

My mother had had one staunch ally during her childhood years: her father. Captain Peter Hastings could trace his lineage back to the House of Plantagenet, which included Henry V and Richard the Lionheart. Deep in that family tree was also a mysterious link to

Robin Hood. As far as my family are concerned, Robin Hood is not a fictional figure. He was Robert, Earl of Huntingdon.

He existed, and he still does. And not just in Hollywood films but in the middle names of my uncles. Every one of them is Robin Hood, and Uncle Willie – William Edward Robin Hood – is the 17th and current Earl of Huntingdon. It is a title that is worth very little in material value – there is no stately home and no land to go with it – but it has a certain historical magic, I suppose.

Uncle Willie, my mother and their two brothers did not see much of their parents. Nanny took care of the children's everyday needs and a nursery maid was ever present. They got under the feet of Mrs Paddy, the cook, and mimicked Stampy, their butler. The household bristled with staff.

The children ate, played and slept in the east wing of the house. They were presented to their parents in the drawing room of the main house at exactly six o'clock every evening: William, Emma, Simon and John, in that order. All present and correct. All sent to bed.

My grandfather is the reason that we lived at Park House Stables in Kingsclere, a village on the Hampshire/Berkshire border. His uncle was a brewery magnate called Sir William Bass. Sir William had no children and was concerned that the Bass name was threatened with extinction. So he asked my grandfather if he would consider adopting Bass into his own name.

Grandma was appalled.

'I will not have any part of that common beer name,' she said. 'You can if you wish, but let it be your business.'

My grandfather duly changed his name by deed poll to Captain Peter Hastings-Bass, and all of his children's surnames became Hastings-Bass. My grandmother steadfastly remained Mrs Priscilla Hastings. Most people called her Mrs Hastings. A few close friends called her Pris. Two naughty nephews dropped the 'r' and got away with it, but woe betide anyone who called her 'Prissy'.

'I am not Prissy. Not to anyone!'

In return for the adoption of the name, my grandfather inherited the Bass family fortune on Sir William's death. In 1953 he used it to

buy Park House Stables and the surrounding fifteen hundred acres on the southern outskirts of Kingsclere. It had the benefit of downland turf on Cannon Heath Down that had never in its history seen the blade of a plough. It was deep, lush, springy grass – perfect for gallops. There were just over fifty stables, onsite accommodation for the employees and a house big enough for an expanding family and domestic staff.

It was a magnificent house. The short drive, between two Lebanon cedar trees planted in the middle of perfectly maintained lawns, led up to a front door that stood twelve feet high and seven feet across. A stone vestibule protected it, with ivy-enlaced columns on either side. The north-facing wall of the house was covered with a mature Virginia creeper, while the south side boasted sweet-smelling hydrangea.

The house had huge sash windows that filled the rooms with light. The only room that was dark was the kitchen, where the cook and her army of helpers baked, steamed, boiled and roasted slightly below ground level. The kitchen separated the adult side of the house from the children's quarters.

When guests were welcomed through that front door by Stampy, the butler, his heels would click together on the black and white marble floor. My grandparents shared the main bedroom, with windows to the south and west, their views across the adjacent farmland – also part of the estate – to Watership Down and beyond it to Beacon Hill. Sir William Bass would have been satisfied with the acquisition afforded by the addition of his surname.

My grandfather would only enjoy his new surroundings for a few years. A persistent cough that had been with him for ages worsened, and his skin turned a shade of yellowy grey. As illness ravaged his body, he had to make plans that would last beyond his lifetime.

He employed a twenty-four-year-old American-born assistant trainer in whom he saw something special. He was a good amateur rider, had a rugby-union blue from Cambridge, played cricket and polo. He was handsome, with jet-black hair parted to the side, full lips, dark-brown eyes and clear, fresh skin, marred only by a livid red scar across his left cheek.

He had an extraordinary way with horses and, importantly, he was not intimidated by my grandmother. He had no family money, which might be construed as an advantage, as it made him less likely to leave. The only negative was that he had a reputation for being a bit of a ladies' man. Grandpa was confident he would grow out of that.

His name was Ian Balding. Six months after he arrived at Park House Stables, my grandfather died of cancer at the age of forty-three. It was 1964, the year of the Tokyo Olympics. My mother was just fifteen. Nanny passed on the news of their father's death and the instruction from their mother that none of the children were to cry in public.

The grief belonged to Grandma and to her alone.

In terms of the business, it was two years before the Jockey Club would allow women to hold a trainer's licence. They were banned on the grounds that female trainers might see semi-naked jockeys in the weighing room – and who knows what might have happened if that came to pass! Might they be overcome with desire? Faint from the shock?

Grandma had to allow a man to take over as the trainer at Park House, so she allowed Ian Balding to take on the licence. She remained on hand to help with the owners, many of whom were personal friends, and she had her views on which races the horses should run in, but the management of the business, of the staff, and the day-to-day training of the horses was the responsibility of my father.

Grandma and my father ate dinner together every night. They had breakfast together every morning. He rode out with the race-horses, a flat cap on his head, a tweed sports jacket worn over his dark-beige breeches. Grandma walked or drove with her whippet and her Labrador to stand by his side, binoculars in her hands. They commented to each other on how each horse was moving, how each rider was coping and whether a certain race at Ascot, Newbury or Goodwood might suit. Ian Balding charmed the sensible pants off the widow Hastings. He made her laugh.

Ian introduced her to a colourful array of girlfriends in mini-

skirts, tight tops and big sunglasses, their hair piled up high. None of them met with the approval of Mrs Hastings. He worked hard, he trained winners, played cricket with the boys, tennis with the sporty American owners and often drove my mother back to school, much to the delight of her teenage friends. Ian was the only one she could talk to about her father and how much she missed him. She was only fifteen and needed someone with whom to share her fears, her problems and news of school, to test her on her French and talk to about her domineering mother. Ian became that confidant and, best of all, when he dropped her off, her friends would gather round and giggle excitedly as the Cary Grant lookalike took her suitcase out of the boot.

My mother was bright. She excelled in English and history and was an A-grade student. She was advised by her careers teacher at school to apply to Cambridge University. Her eldest brother, William, was already there, at Trinity College. Her younger brothers, Simon and John, would eventually follow. When it came to Emma, however, there was no encouragement.

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Grandma. 'I will not have a bluestocking for a daughter.'

There was no point in arguing. The sixties may have been in full swing, but my mother was locked in a Jane Austen novel where women learned to play the piano, to sew and, if it was strictly necessary, to cook. They could be witty, pretty and well read but God forbid they should be 'clever' or have opinions of their own.

Ian suggested that Emma go to America to visit his family. By coincidence, his little sister Gail had been at prep school with Emma and they had been firm friends. It was the first time my mother had been abroad. Family holidays had always been taken at Bognor Regis, in a rented house within walking distance of the pebbly beach. Crucially, it was not far for Grandma to leave the children and join her friends at Goodwood racecourse. The children came to dread Boring Bognor.

So my mother flew to America, the land of the free – free at least from her mother. When she came back, armed with her own declaration of independence, she went to London to find a job. She

grew in confidence, had her own income from work as a secretary and was enjoying being able to make her own decisions, but when she went home it was back to square one. A contemptuous 'What on earth do you think you look like?' from her mother would send her scurrying back to her room to change her clothes to something more conservative. Progress was constantly and consistently blocked.

Ian Balding, meanwhile, was fitting in just fine. He looked good in a dinner jacket and even better in sports gear. He hadn't been in the army so had none of the constraints of officer syndrome and didn't live in tweed or yellow cords. He was different to any man any of them knew – there was a hint of danger about him, yet he looked like a boy scout.

He was far removed from and much more fun than any of the men my mother met in London. She watched the way he dealt with her mother and envied him. He had such an easy manner. She rode with him one morning and, after the racehorses had finished their work, Ian called out, 'Come on, Ems, we're going back this way.'

He headed towards the fence line and popped his horse over a jump about three feet high on to the side of the Downs. Emma followed. They galloped along together, jumping everything in their path – hedges, ditches, post and rail fences. She felt exhilarated – galloping on a tightrope of fear and fun.

Many women had stayed in the guest room of Park House and were certainly worth creeping down the corridor for, but none had quite made Ian feel the way he did that morning on the Downs. As if overnight, Emma had grown up. He had never really looked at her before, not like that.

Three months later, he asked Grandma for permission to marry her only daughter.

'Really? Well, that's very kind of you,' she said.

My father went to telephone his mother in America while Grandma called Emma in to see her.

'I understand you're going to marry Ian. You're a lucky girl.'

'Oh,' said my mother, 'am I? He hasn't asked me.'

He never did actually ask her but, clearly, it had been decided.

When he rang America to pass on the good news to his own mother, Eleanor Hoagland Balding said, 'So which one did you choose, the mother or the daughter?'

The wedding was organized by my grandmother. My mother was allowed to invite ten friends. She was twenty, my father thirty. A number of his ex-girlfriends (the ones whose names he could remember and whose addresses he had logged) came to St Mary's Church in Kingsclere to see the great charmer finally tie the knot.

With no father of the bride to call upon, Grandma decided that it would be appropriate for Emma's eldest brother, William, to give her away. My mother was horribly nervous. She had not really had time to think this through. Ian made her heart skip a beat but she wasn't at all sure that she was ready for this. She dreaded the sight of all those women from her fiancé's past, in their miniskirts and trendy hats, their sunglasses and platform shoes. It felt a bit like the ride on the Downs – dangerous, with the threat of a fall right around the corner.

Her brother William stood with her outside the church door. She looked to him for comfort as he took her hand to lead her down the aisle. The best he could offer was, 'Your hands are sweaty.'

So Ian and Emma, my parents, were married in the summer of 1969. They honeymooned in Cornwall, at a house belonging to a friend of Dad's. They couldn't be away for long because the flat season was in full swing and my father was busy. They stayed for four nights and then they were back to the hectic life of Kingsclere and the glare of my grandmother.

My father gave my mother a horse called Milo as a wedding present. It was a re-gift, really, as Dad had been given him and continued to ride him. By 1970, he'd clearly forgotten that he had gifted him to my mother at all, as he rode him in his own colours and listed himself as 'owner' for the whole point-to-point season.

My mother's life ran to the clock of her new husband. His work was important and all-consuming. The horses were divided into two 'lots' of around thirty horses each. One was exercised before breakfast, the other after. My father got up before six, rode Milo out with First Lot and then went to Park House for breakfast with my

grandmother, his assistant trainer and Geoff Lewis, the stable jockey. Then he rode out a different horse with Second Lot and went to the office to plan the entries, speak to the owners, pay the bills and sign the cheques for the staff wages.

There was racing from Monday to Saturday. On Sundays, he played cricket in the summer and rugby in the winter. Or my mother drove the horsebox to Tweseldown or Larkhill or Hackwood Park so that my father could ride Milo in a point-to-point.

His life was frantic, but my mother was lonely. She needed company. So she trawled the adverts in the *Horse & Hound*, the *Telegraph* and the *Sporting Life*. Eventually, the *Newbury Weekly News* came up trumps:

> ***Boxer Puppies for Sale***
>
> 3 BITCHES, 2 DOGS
>
> Already weaned. Ready for new home.
>
> *Phone Paul on 0703 556218*

Mum and her younger brother Simon drove down to Southampton to see the litter of puppies. Paul opened the door wearing a tight white blouse, an A-line skirt, a silk scarf tied in a bow around his neck and full make-up.

'Come in, come in,' he said as he ushered them through the door. 'Now, sit down, the both of you. My, what a handsome couple you make. Cup of tea?'

Uncle Simon blustered and flustered, 'We're not, we're not . . . It's not like that. She's my sister,' not sure where to look.

Paul shimmied into the kitchen to flick on the kettle.

'So, my lovelies, what do you know about boxers? Do you realize how much work they take, how much exercise they need, how they will take over your life?'

He made tea, and for half an hour he told them every detail about the behaviour of boxers. He grilled my mother about the house,

where the dog would sleep, how often it would be exercised and what sort of lifestyle it was entering into. My mother was tested further on her suitability to be a dog owner than she had been to be a wife. Forced to think about it more deeply, she knew that this was what she wanted.

When finally allowed to see the litter of puppies, she was captivated. One of the red and white bitches was playing with her brothers when my mother knelt down beside the pen. Paul and Uncle Simon stood back to let the bonding process begin. The puppy looked up at my mother and wiggled her hips. Mum leant down to pick her up, and the puppy seemed to smile. She licked my mother's face and then pressed her velvet head into the soft part of my mother's neck, just below her jawline.

My mother smiled and a tear formed at the corner of her eye.

'Hello, you,' she whispered. 'Where have you been?'

Uncle Simon uttered his first words in an hour. 'We'd like to take that one, please. If it's not an imposition. If we can, that is.'

Paul had watched my mother and understood. She had been a bit stranded, floating on a raft not of her own making.

'Of course. She's weaned, she's had her injections and she's good to go.'

Candy sat by Uncle Simon's feet in the passenger seat of the car. He was wearing open-toed sandals, which was how he realized, as they passed Winchester, that she had peed on his foot. It was the only thing she ever did wrong.

Boxers are such fun to be around. Forever playful, fiercely loyal and always affectionate, they will demand a full part in family life. Mum said that if we grew up thinking that boxers were beautiful, then the whole world would be a beautiful place. She was right.

I arrived about six months after Candy, in January 1971. My father was not present at the birth. It was not the done thing.

I spotted early on that the dogs got lots of attention so worked out that it would be best to be a dog. I crawled to drink from the water bowl – I mean, who doesn't do that? I stopped short of sharing their food, because I was a fussy eater.

During my early years, Candy was queen of our castle and she took her responsibilities seriously. When a photographer came to take an official black and white photo of 'the new baby', he asked my mother to find something for me to play with. I was lying on my front on a rug on the lawn. Candy watched my mother disappear and silently moved in next to me, just to make sure the man with the camera didn't whisk me away. The best photos are of Candy and me together.

Later that day, Mum shut Candy and Bertie, the lurcher, in the house and headed off down the steep drive with me in the pram. She was wearing a new coat, which changed her outline from behind. She heard a noise and, when she turned round, she saw a slightly wonky-looking boxer trotting down the drive, barking a low, gruff warning alarm.

'Candy, what are you doing here?' she said.

Candy looked a bit dazed, as well she might. She had clearly thought that I was being abducted, so she'd thrown herself out of a top-floor window.

She had tried the back door, the front door and all the windows on the ground floor but found them locked. So she'd run up the stairs and discovered one window that was slightly ajar. Pushing hard, she had squeezed through the gap and jumped the twenty feet down to the ground. Her job was to protect me, and protect me she damn well would.

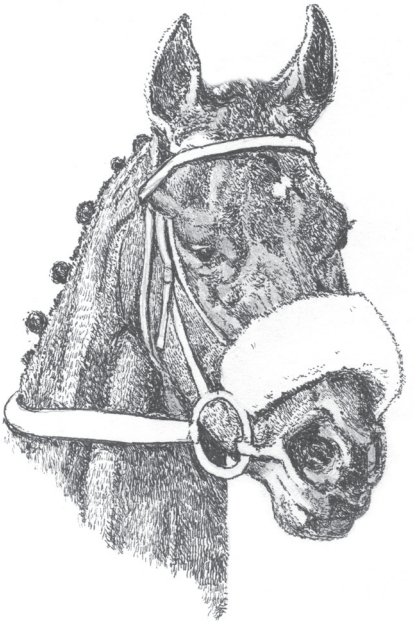
She suffered only mild concussion and recovered quickly.

When Candy was nine years old, my parents took a rare holiday. My mother was persuaded, against her better judgement, to send her and Bertie to kennels. What happened is still a mystery but it seems that Candy had a heart attack. She died before my mother returned.

Mum has never since sent a dog to kennels. It wasn't the kennels' fault, she knows that, but she still frets that Candy must have felt abandoned and confused, that she wouldn't have known she was being left there only for a fortnight, that she must have panicked and weakened her heart with anxiety.

2

Mill Reef



The year was 1971. Specify beat Black Secret by a neck to win the Grand National under a jockey called John Cook, wearing the colours of Fred Pontin, the owner of Pontin's holiday camps.

I do this, I'm afraid. Mark my years by Grand National or Derby winners. Sometimes I do it by Olympics – give me a year and I'll tell you where the Olympics were held, but that only works every four years, so Grand Nationals and Derbies are more precise.

In 1971, the Derby winner was a little horse called Mill Reef. He was one of the true greats. He's still talked about as one of the best Derby winners ever. He's also the only Derby winner I've ridden – well, sat on. But there's a photo to prove it and everything. I'm

wearing red cords, blue wellington boots, a blue jumper and a red balaclava. I am a vision in red and blue.

I'm leaning forward like a jockey but there's no saddle. I'm turning to the camera and smiling. I have a light grip on the reins and no one is holding me.

Hang on a minute . . . No one is holding me and no one is holding him. What the hell is going on here? I'm barely eighteen months old, I'm on a four-year-old colt who the year before had won the Derby, the Eclipse, the King George and the Arc, and earlier that year had won the Coronation Cup. Alone. There isn't an adult in sight.

He could have bolted, I could have lost my balance and smashed my skull on the floor. Just one step sideways and I'd have been a mess. Clearly that mattered little to the people around the great horse – that is, my parents.

My dad cries when he talks about Mill Reef, because he knows he owes that brave little bay horse everything. I once met a man who bought his first house with the money he won on Mill Reef in the Derby. My father never put a penny on him and yet could claim to have won his career and lifestyle because of him.

Ask my father what happened in 1971 and he'll tell you how disappointed he was when Mill Reef was beaten by Brigadier Gerard in the 2000 Guineas, how easy he was to train, how he had a serenity and inner confidence, how when he first saw him gallop it was like watching a ballerina float across the stage: his hooves barely touched the ground before they sprang up into the next stride. He was neat, compact – some might say small – but he was nimble, agile and fast.

Strong fitness training for racehorses, when they gallop fast in pairs or threes, is called 'work'. It happens twice a week – at Kingsclere, where my father trained, the horses walk for twenty minutes up to the Downs on a Wednesday and a Saturday, and that's where they do their serious work.

Some horses work moderately and improve on a racecourse; others show it all at home and are disappointing on race day. Mill Reef was so good at home that he needed one horse to lead him for the first half of the gallop and another one to jump in halfway to stay

with him to the end. No horse was good enough to stay with him for the whole length of the gallop. When he got on a racecourse, he was even better.

Dad will tell you how he got stuck in traffic on the way to Epsom and had to run the last two miles to make sure he was in time to put the saddle on Mill Reef for the Derby. He might admit that he had a funny feeling that Mill Reef was going to win the greatest flat race of all, but even he didn't know that this wonderful horse would do it so easily.

What he will forget to tell you, if you ask him what else happened in 1971, is that I was born.

No one was prepared to rush my grandmother out of her home, so she took her time. When she was ready, Grandma built a new house across the road and painted it pink. We called it 'The Pink Palace'. There she would reign for a further fifty years.

The rooms at Park House were used as living quarters for the stable staff, and it acquired an air of faded glory. Now in a new house not far away, my mother was removed from the workings of the yard, and a safe distance away from Grandma, but she was also disconnected from her husband, who worked every day of the week.

My mother might see him if he popped in to change, but often he jumped in the shower, pulled on a suit and dashed off to the races. He would come back in time for evening stables and then, finally, some time after seven, he would arrive at the house with a large board that looked like a ladder of narrow slats. 'The Slate' was sacrosanct.

Into each horizontal runner on the board, he would slide the name of a stable lad, and either side of it the name of a horse. The horse to the left of the name would be his ride for First Lot and the name to the right of it the one he would ride out Second Lot. The names of horses and lads were printed with a Dymo Maxi printing gun. It had a wheel with letters on it that would imprint in white on to coloured plastic tape. The horses were colour-coded according to their age, and the human names were all in blue.

It took a fair amount of planning, and on Wednesdays and Saturdays there was 'work' to be sorted out. My father did not like to be

interrupted while he made his lists on paper with his all-colour Biro: black for the date and for the horses' names; blue for the riders and their weight; green for the gallop to be used, the distance to be covered and the instructions; red for the comments (written afterwards) on how they had worked.

Wednesday, 30 August 1972

Seven	7f		
Merry Slipper	Joe Bonner	8st 3lbs	Lead, good bowling canter
Mill Reef	John Hallum	9st 7lbs	Strong even canter, track in behind

In the summer of 1972, Dad had planned a strong, bowling canter for Mill Reef on the Seven Gallop (so named because it was seven furlongs in length). Not a full piece of work – he wasn't ready for that – but a gallop fast enough to ascertain how well he was and how much fitness work he would need before he could run again. John Hallum, who always rode him at home, was on board and set off behind Merry Slipper, who was going as fast as he could. Mill Reef – or Jimmy, as John called him – was swinging along in his usual fluid way.

It was and still is quite rare for a Derby winner to be kept in training as a four-year-old, but Paul Mellon, the American philanthropist who owned him, believed that racing was about being a good sport. The latest Derby winner is the headline horse – he can earn millions in his first season at stud. The risk of keeping him in training is that he may not improve or, even worse, he might deteriorate and therefore devalue his earning potential as a stallion.

In this case, the gamble of keeping Mill Reef in training had turned out well – he had won a Group 1 race in France that spring by ten lengths and the Coronation Cup in a tight finish at Epsom in June. Dad was worried about the way he'd struggled in that race and got the vets to check him over. He was found to be suffering from 'the virus'. He was sick.

'The virus', as all trainers call it, is an unspecified illness that can sweep through a yard, affecting all the horses to a greater or lesser degree. How it is caused is a mystery, and even stranger is how it

suddenly disappears. The symptoms are hard to spot because the horses are generally fine at home. They work well, they eat up, they look healthy in their skin but, when it comes to racing, they run out of puff at the crucial stage and abruptly look as if they are treading water. Most ordinary horses finish nearer last than first when they have the virus. Mill Reef still managed to win, but he wasn't right.

So he was given time over the summer to recover, and this gallop in late August was part of his preparation for another tilt at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris on the first Sunday of October. It's the most stylish, glamorous occasion in the racing calendar. I have presented the Arc on television many times and I love it – as a sporting event, as a fashion parade and as a reminder that the French do things with such, as they would say, *élan*.

When Mill Reef careered away with the Arc in 1971, he was the first British-trained winner since 1948 and, if he could retain it, he would be the only British-trained horse *ever* to win back-to-back Arcs. It was with this elusive challenge in mind that Mill Reef was winging his way up the Seven Gallop early that morning.

My father was sitting on a horse further up the gradual incline so that he could watch the final, fastest two furlongs and assess the fitness of his star. The heat was not yet in the sun. It was a bright day, the grass slightly browned by the summer months. My father loved the view from up there. He could look north from the height of the Downs, right across Berkshire and Hampshire, as far as Reading, sixteen miles away. He loved it there. He was a lucky, lucky man.

That bubble was about to burst and, for the first time in his life, neither his luck nor his charm would save him.

He heard the distant pounding of hooves. Mill Reef and his lead horse, Merry Slipper, came thundering by, their nostrils flaring, their coats gleaming like polished mahogany in the early-morning sun. John Hallum was crouched over Jimmy's neck, his soft peaked cap turned backwards so that it didn't blow off in the wind, his reins tight, holding the horse together as he lengthened his stride and quickened his pace. He was moving well, looking good and, with a satisfied smile, my father turned to watch the next pair coming up the gallop.

As he followed that second pair with his eyes, sweeping his gaze from right to left, he noticed something strange. The first pair of horses were not at the top of the gallop as they should be, gently pulling up to a trot and turning to walk back along the track. Instead, one of them was standing to the side of the gallop, with only three legs on the ground. It was – oh God, he thought, it couldn't be – it was Mill Reef.

John Hallum was holding him, trying to keep him calm as the other racehorses galloped past.

Dad's heart stopped. He started shouting at the work riders coming up the gallop, *'Pull up! Pull up!'*

He then turned and cantered with dread towards John and Mill Reef.

'I heard a crack, Guv'nor. It's not good,' said John, his quiet voice faltering.

The horse, whose galloping motion was so smooth and so easy, had suddenly juddered. John had realized in an instant that something was badly wrong and pulled on the reins immediately to stop Mill Reef doing further damage to himself.

John, the man who loved and cherished this horse even more than my father did, was cradling Mill Reef's head into his chest to stop him moving, stroking his face and whispering into his ear, 'It'll be all right, Jimmy. It'll be all right.'

Mill Reef had fractured the cannon bone between the knee and the ankle of his front left leg. He was holding it above the ground, a look of confusion in his eyes, pain searing through his body.

Most racehorses will not stand still when they are hurting – they thrash, they bite and they try to gallop away from the thing that is causing them pain, injuring themselves further in the process. Mill Reef stood still. John kept whispering in his ear, telling him that the pain would stop soon, that he was a champion, that it would be all right.

Both John and my father knew that it would not be all right. They knew Mill Reef would never race again.

When a human breaks a leg, they can recover on crutches, taking the weight off the bad leg and allowing the bone to heal. A horse can't do that and, for most, the suffering is too great to make an

operation viable. In 1972, it was rare, if not unheard of, for a horse with a fractured cannon bone to survive.

My father and John both understood the gravity of the situation. Mill Reef had to be saved, whatever the cost. This wasn't just a commercial decision. Their world had revolved around that horse since the day he had arrived in the yard. If my father knew anything about love, he knew he loved this horse.

Time must have dragged for the next hour. Grandma had been watching work and drove back in her car to the yard as fast as she could. She organized for the horsebox to get to the top of the Downs and sent for the vet. Riders often fell off on the gallops but, thankfully, accidents are not an everyday occurrence. Perhaps once or twice in a season there would be a serious injury, but the chances of this happening to the best horse in the yard were 100:1. It was utterly shocking that it should happen to not only our best horse but the best horse in the country.

All that time, John kept talking to Mill Reef – not as a Derby winner, a champion, a superstar, but as Jimmy: his friend, the horse that he adored.

More remarkable than the way in which this beautifully balanced racehorse had, on the course, sailed past those stronger, bigger and more muscular than him was the way in which he allowed himself to be saved. He trusted John and he trusted my father, so he hobbled up the ramp into the horsebox and was gently taken on the short journey back to the yard.

John talked to him all the while and stayed by his head as the vet examined him. 'He knows what he's doing, boy,' he murmured into Mill Reef's ear. 'He'll sort you out.'

The vet did sort him out, but the horse would have known nothing about the plate and the three screws that were inserted into his front leg until he came round from the anaesthetic. The whole operation was done on site, in a large square room that had once been a chapel. Paul Mellon had instructed my father to do whatever it took, at whatever cost, to save the horse. When my father had called him in America, Mr Mellon's first question was, 'Poor John – is

he all right?' He knew how much his horse meant to the man who every day groomed him, fed him, mucked him out and rode him.

The recovery room was covered in the thickest, freshest straw, banked up at the sides. Mill Reef was never alone. Either John, my father or Bill Palmer would sleep in there with him while he lay with his left foreleg in plaster.

Eventually, Mill Reef could stand and, as his recovery progressed, so the attention increased. He had hundreds and hundreds of cards on lines of string in the recovery room, and the BBC had a live TV link-up with my father during Sports Personality of the Year in December 1972 to see how the patient was progressing.

The plaster was eventually removed, and Mill Reef could walk. He hobbled at first, unsure of how to put one leg in front of the other, but as he realized that it no longer hurt to place his weight evenly on all four legs, so he gained in confidence. Shortly after that, I was lifted on to his back and the photograph was taken. A last snapshot of Jimmy at home.

With every day that Mill Reef gained in strength, so John Hallum knew that his time with him was running out. Mill Reef's life had been saved, but his racing career was over, and that meant his stay at Kingsclere was coming to an end.

John went in the horsebox with him to the National Stud and wept as he kissed Mill Reef goodbye.

'It's all change for you now, my boy. What a life you'll have,' he explained to his friend. 'Mares will come and visit you, so you be polite and always say thank you.

'This is your lovely new home in Newmarket, with all you can eat and huge fields to gallop in. You'll want for nothing, I promise you, nothing. I'll come and visit you to see how you're getting on, you see if I don't. Be a good boy now, Jimmy. Be a good boy.'

John was true to his word, and every time Mill Reef heard his footsteps approaching and his gentle voice he would whicker in recognition and fondness.

A film, *Something to Brighten the Morning*, was produced, with Albert Finney doing the voiceover, to tell the story of Mill Reef. He was the champion cut down in his prime, the perfect little

package who had taken on and beaten bigger beasts. He had faced his toughest battle of all away from the racecourse, and he had won that too.

After Mill Reef had retired to stud, Mr Mellon wrote to my father.

'Dear Ian, I'd like to do something special for you as a friend,' he proposed in his elegant handwriting, 'and I would prefer to do it now rather than waiting until the day my will is read. Mill Reef brought me so much pleasure and you were masterful with him. I'd like to set up a trust fund for you and your children. You can do anything you like with it and, if you're careful, it will last long beyond your lifetime.

'I do hope this will be useful to you, and in any case it comes to you with my warmest affection and regards, and my continued thanks for all you have done to make racing in England a tremendous pleasure. Yours ever, Paul.'

My father read the letter again and again. He could hardly believe it. He carried so much guilt for the way in which Mill Reef had broken his leg. He questioned himself endlessly – what if I hadn't used that gallop? What if I'd sent him up second rather than first, would it still have happened? Not that he would have wished such a painful and life-threatening injury on any horse, but the question remained, why did it have to be him? Why the best horse he would ever train? Why?

Yet here was Mr Mellon – he was always 'Mr Mellon' – thanking him and offering him a life-changing reward. My father knew that he would never have a chance like this again. Owners were not all as philosophical and as altruistic as Paul Mellon. He wrote straight back, 'Thank you. That is an extraordinary offer and I would like to use your generosity to fund my children's education. Emma and I have no savings to speak of and can't afford to send them to the best school, but we will make sure they make the most of this opportunity. Thank you so much.'

Eighteen years later, when I was at Cambridge University, I sent Mr Mellon a letter to express my gratitude for the education he had funded.

He sent me a postcard back with a picture of Clare College on it.

He had studied there and used their black and gold college colours as the inspiration for his racing colours. It read:

A picture of Clare for Clare,

You need not thank me. I have watched from afar and you have more than fulfilled your side of the bargain. Be lucky, be happy and stay true to yourself.

With much love,

PM

As for Mill Reef, he passed on his brilliance to his progeny and, in doing so, became a champion sire: his son, Shirley Heights, would win the Derby in 1978. He eventually died in 1986, of heart failure, the year before another son, Reference Point, would also win the Derby.

There is a statue of Mill Reef at the National Stud, where he spent the majority of his life. Under it is an inscription from a speech that Paul Mellon gave about him. The last line reads: 'Though small, I gave my all. I gave my heart.'

There is also an exact replica of that statue in the new yard that my father built the following year. He called it the Mill Reef yard. New visitors to Park House are shown that statue and told the story of the greatest horse he ever trained – the horse who encapsulated the mighty swing for Dad from a charmed life to the brutal reality of a world where everything would not always go his way.

Sometimes, early in the morning or when evening stables have finished, you will find my father standing alone looking at that statue.