About the Book

From early childhood, when her inspirational mother would take her on trips along her beloved Ridgeway in a horse-drawn cart, Candida Lycett Green has retained a love of green lanes and tracks and of moving along at a horse's pace. Her insatiable appetite for exploring unknown territory has led her to travel all over England for weeks at a time, and often these journeys have come at important turning points in her life.

In August 2000 she sets off on a 200-mile journey through Yorkshire and Northumberland to raise funds for breast cancer after her own recent fight with the disease. As she describes the ride she also dips back into past journeys by horse, her idyllic childhood in the bohemian Betjeman household, a charmed youth in the swinging sixties, her epic overland honeymoon in India, motherhood, and a marriage spanning almost forty years.

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An English Odyssey

Candida Lycett Green

This book is dedicated to all those who sponsored
me on my ride in August 2000 to raise
money for the Abernethy Cancer Centre

BOLTON ABBEY TO STANHOPE

STANHOPE TO INGRAM

AUTHOR’S NOTE

I was going to go on a long ride anyway when all the cancer treatments were over. About two weeks before I was due to leave, my friend Christopher Gibbs suggested I raise money for cancer care on the ride. I took a day to compose the begging letter with Helen Kime’s help. I printed some off and sent them to everyone in my address book and to my places of work. I explained that it was the *combination* of the orthodox treatment and the complementary help I received that gave me the ammunition to fight the cancer battle with confidence.

I think all cancer sufferers should have the opportunities and choices that I had in order to maximize their chances. When faced with a devastating diagnosis and the debilitating effects of the chemotherapy and radiotherapy, it is not just the body that suffers but also the spirit. With the right help it is often possible to overcome fear and achieve peace of mind in the most difficult circumstances. You can also strengthen your immune system and raise your energy level by living and eating right. All this costs money and few people can afford to pay out anything extra, particularly when their income may have fallen through not being able to work.

There could be no better place in Britain than the NHS’s Churchill Hospital in Oxford in which to be treated for cancer. I would choose to go to them every time rather than a private hospital. Operating within the Churchill’s confines, the Abernethy Cancer Centre is a charitable organization that provides invaluable support to cancer patients and their families, offering a sympathetic ear and advice as well as a

basic framework of complementary therapies. Everything is free of charge. The £125,000 raised through the ride went towards employing a full-time leader for the centre, creating more treatment rooms, expanding the library, making a garden and enabling the staff to better emulate the Bristol Cancer Help Centre, which represents the gold standard for complementary care in cancer.

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PRELUDE

I SUPPOSE I am happiest of all with the long road in my eye. I love the thrill of the journey and setting off up unknown tracks with ever the hope of finding heaven knows what over the horizon or around the next bend. I love the enforced slow pace, the feeling of belonging to the country and the camaraderie with my horse. I love wandering through villages, the backs of towns and the outskirts of giant conurbations and looking into gardens and watching other people's lives. I read Ordnance Survey maps in bed like other people read novels. Ours are the best in the world and make everywhere come alive.

Over the decades I must have travelled three thousand miles, criss-crossing England for weeks at a time, along tracks and lanes and occasional stretches of main road. The journeys I make by horse aren't like a holiday and they aren't an escape: they affirm my existence as no other way of life can, and anchor me to England and my past and future. They are not grand explorations of uncharted stretches, but parochial voyages of discovery and wonder that always lead me back again to T. S. Eliot's lines from 'Little Gidding':

. . . There are other places
Which are the world's end,
Some at the sea's jaws,
Or over a dark lake, in a desert or a city –
But this is the nearest, in place
and time,
Now and in England.

The journeys are a continuation from where I started, here under the downs at Uffington in what used to be Berkshire. The village is settled around the great cruciform church, and the chalk White Horse, carved into the hill, spreads its ancient spindly legs like an abstract painting against the soft, steep slope. From the early 1930s onwards my parents lived in Garrards Farm on Broad Street, which they rented for thirty-six pounds a year from the local big farmer, Mr Wheeler. As small children my brother Paul and I were taken by our mother up the slow curving lane under the White Horse to the Ridgeway. It was this, the oldest track in Europe, which follows the crest of the downs for miles in either direction, that began anchoring our hearts to these chalk uplands. When Mr Wheeler wanted Garrards Farm back for his son in the late Forties, we moved along the Ridgeway to Farnborough, the highest village in the county, more than seven hundred feet up, tiny, remote, where I became even more rooted to the chalk and the endless tracks that led to woods and far-off places.

Muddy Lane and Moonlight Lane stretched away from either end of Farnborough to untilled valleys down which my mother drove, sometimes at a gallop, the low rubber-wheeled trolley cart with most of the children from the village laughing uproariously and bumping up and down in the back: the Ryan girls, who talked in an Irish brogue and lived in a farm cottage called California, half a mile down the lane towards Newbury; Billy Wilkinson, who had dark eyes and lived next to the village hall, where I learned to dance the Palais Glide and the Gay Gordons; Maureen and Janet Carter, who lived in the last council house in the row, overlooking a cornfield; Johnny Willoughby, whose mother resigned from the Women’s Institute when she didn’t win the competition to see how many different things you can get into a matchbox (she had used a Swan Vestas box and been disqualified); the Marshall girls, who were always late for school be cause to get to it they had to walk a mile along

a languorously beautiful combe (their brother had got his finger squashed in a washing mangle and had to have it off); and Juney White, who was my best friend.

Juney lived in a tiny cottage next to our school playground and shared a bed with her large sister Topsy, who hung out with GIs from Greenham Common on Saturday nights. I never went anywhere without Juney, and usually all the others: they taught me to eat young hawthorn leaves (‘bread and cheese’) in spring, mallow seed heads in summer and beechnuts in autumn, and quite a lot about my own body. There was nothing they didn’t know, and consequently I didn’t know, about what we called ‘doing it’. Innocent experiments went on under the rugs on the way back from picnics in the trolley cart and the edges of my world were set by the distance my mother drove her Connemara mare Tulira, or by how far my pony, Dirk, ran away with me, pulling my arms out of their sockets. He had been sold to my mother because she so loved discussing art with the vendor, John Rothenstein, the director of the Tate Gallery.

I eventually learned to control Dirk and was taken on the first of many ‘riding tours’, as my mother called them, at the age of eight, along with Juliet Smith, who was pony-mad and brilliantly clever, and with whom I shared glamorous Aunt Patricia, who had a house in Belgravia with close-fitting carpets. We rode along the Ridgeway towards Lambourn, where at last we were allowed to camp in what we hoped and imagined was a haunted spot at Seven Barrows.

Over the past three years we had witnessed our brothers and cousins camping there but were deemed too young to stay out all night and were taken home in our bashed-up old Vauxhall. Now the time for our initiation had come. We said prayers, kneeling at our army camp beds under my mother’s instruction, and we sang ‘Oh come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for thee’, in order to dispel the ghosts from the barrows. We didn’t sleep a wink.

In the morning we rode to Kingstone Down, where we tried to jump a row of mouldy hurdles along the old gallops, and from where, between two lonesome beech trees, there is an amazing, sudden dead-on view of Ashdown, a chalk-white beauty of a house, standing tall, ethereal and stranded in the middle of nowhere. It was built by Lord Craven in the early 1660s. He was close to Elizabeth of Bohemia, the Winter Queen, who had been banished to Holland for so long and had just returned, impoverished, to London. My mother told me that he built it for her and that he chose this desolate spot so that she would be safe from the plague, and that there were four-inch gaps under all the doors so that draughts would blow the germs away. Sadly the Winter Queen never lived to see Ashdown: she died in Lord Craven's house in London, leaving him her papers and pictures. He lived for another thirty-five years and died a bachelor at the age of ninety.

There was an air of tragedy about Ashdown then; it was empty and gaunt-looking, and when my mother tried to take a photograph of Juliet and me by the house there were so many flies climbing over her Rolleiflex camera they completely obscured the lens. She told us that the devil was the Prince of Flies and our terror nearly reached fever pitch.

The next day we rode through Aldbourne and then on past the deserted village of Snap (which, with its tumbledown cottages and gooseberry bushes grown wild, excited my mother beyond measure) to the haunting stones of Avebury, where she went into paroxysms of joy and fell upon the reserved and brilliant archaeologist Stuart Piggott, who was digging there, while Juliet and I fell asleep in the Red Lion pub. Although I was bored by my mother's historical lectures, the romance of the ancient earthwork, the ruin and our mysterious forebears must then have taken root in my subconscious.

One of the saddest days of my life was leaving Farnborough. The pantechnicons had gone on ahead and the trolley cart pulled by Tulira and driven by my mother was the last thing to leave the old house. Juney White and all our classmates (but for Johnny Willoughby, who wasn't allowed to come) and I sat behind, while Terry Carter and my brother sat facing backwards, their legs dangling over the edge of the cart, leading Tulira's foal Lala Rook and Dirk. I hated our new house, the Mead, in the middle of Wantage on the level vale below the downs. I believed that I had lost my freedom – there were close-knit houses beyond the orchard hemming me in. My father drove the Farnborough children the five miles home in our newly acquired second-hand van with two round windows at the back and I remember the feeling of utter loneliness setting in once my brother had gone back to boarding school.

Wantage was two miles from the Ridgeway, further from it than we'd ever lived before, but in the end I got used to riding along boring roads to reach the freedom of the downs and they still figured large in my life. During the holidays I would set off most mornings on Dirk through the back streets and scarlet-brick housing estates to Icknield Lane, which narrowed into a tiny trickle of a footpath and led me to the house of my new friend, Tuffy Baring, in Ardington. Our fathers had met through church business on the Diocesan Advisory Committee. Tuffy had a grey pony called Dick who ran away with her worse than Dirk ran away with me.

We rode up onto and along the downs for hours at a time, gloriously free from grown-ups. We used to belt out a popular song of the time called 'Looking for Henry Lee' while enacting a complicated scenario around it that involved hiding from each other in the hanging beech woods, just below the Ridgeway. On the way home, our favourite pastime in the late summer was to gallop through ripe fields of corn making tracks like aeroplanes leave in the sky. The

complete illegality of it gave us an untold thrill. We wore lace-up shoes with our jodhpurs and I remember the feeling of the hard heads of wheat hitting at my bare ankles. Our parents had no idea how badly we behaved. My mother broke Dirk to pull a little two-wheeled yellow gig and by the time I was ten my independence was complete. I think that feeling of utter freedom afforded by riding or driving a horse has remained with me ever since.

Juliet came to stay at the Mead and my mother considered us old enough to conduct our own riding tours, under her remote control. She sent us twelve miles along the Ridgeway on our first adventure. We had detailed instructions about where to turn down to Hinton Parva, a tiny village near Bishopstone where my mother had arranged for us to stay in a cottage with a couple who, at the time, she barely knew. My father had met Margaret Penning-Rowsell at a poetry reading in Swindon and asked her and her husband Eddie who worked for Batsford's, the publishers, to lunch. He used to introduce them to other people as 'the Party members', because they were both paid-up members of the Communist Party – and here we were staying in their cottage, terrified, because we knew they didn't believe in God and hence, in our book, were wicked. We sang hymns very loudly through much of the night in an effort to convert them. The Penning-Rowsells seemed quite normal and kind in the morning, as indeed they'd been the evening before, but I suppose we were always looking for drama.

Later that same summer we rode along the Ridgeway for an evening picnic at Wayland's Smithy, a neolithic long barrow, shaded and hidden in tall beech trees, where, the legend goes, Wayland will shoe your horse if you tie it up for the night and leave sixpence on the stone. Juliet and I had a row about the way home, got badly lost and ended up outside the Five Stars pub in Sparsholt at closing time where a group of drunken revellers started jeering at us. Thinking

we would be murdered, we galloped almost all the way home along the road through Childrey and didn't reach Wantage until one in the morning. My parents were fast asleep and completely unperturbed by our absence.

Riding at night held no fear for my mother. She was on 'Downs Patrol' during the Second World War and chose the evening and moonlight shifts, through which she rode her Arab horse, Moti, along the Ridgeway alone, looking for German parachutists. In the long line of beeches beside Kingstone Warren, the racing stables where she rode out steeplechasers in the mornings, she once found the tattered remnants of a parachute caught in the high branches of a tree: too frightened to look for a German in the undergrowth beneath, she galloped down to Uffington to inform the Home Guard.

Her love of night-riding did not diminish. 'Moonlight picnics' were a normal occurrence throughout Paul's and my adolescence. For my seventeenth birthday, my mother hired every equine inhabitant of Miss Merryfield's Riding School stables in Wantage and led a great gaggle of my friends and me for ten miles or more along the Ridgeway to her favourite picnic spot at Knighton Bushes. After the festivities we rode home by the waning light of a steadily clouding-over moon. Some had never ridden before, several people fell off and a few could hardly walk the next day. I was mortified by the whole experience. I was in love with someone called Tim who had driven all the way from Worcestershire to what he expected to be a 'normal' birthday party (that is, the carpet pushed back and dancing and snogging with the lights out to Frank Sinatra's 'Songs for Swinging Lovers'). He left at dawn the next morning in his brand-new Triumph Herald and I never saw him again.

Not content with terrifying a number of my friends on that ride, my mother wrote to my Oxford friend Henry Berens about yet another equestrian cavalcade.

> I am sorry to put so much responsibility on your shoulders, but you GIVE THE IMPRESSION of being very capable [he wasn't]. I want you to be in charge of the young men who are coming to our barn dance. Can you get them to motor here by about 7 pm and they will be fed not with an elaborate dinner but something to fill them up so that they do not get famished on the carriage drive. It is 11 miles from here to Duxford. I have borrowed two wagonettes and have my own trolley cart, dog cart and ralli cart which you have driven already. We shall be going entirely by country lanes, not bumping over the downland tracks like we did last time. No girl is allowed to dare any young man to swim several miles down the Thames, eg back to Oxford or anything silly like that. We DO NOT want a repetition of the Diana Cooper party tragedy in the Thames please. I will take a roll call of everybody going IN to bathe and I sincerely hope they will all be able to answer afterwards. Yours ever, Penelope. PS Dress for Duxford: Jeans or flannel trousers with teddy boy shirts and sweaters. OVERCOATS for carriage drive.

The party took place at an idyllic farm beside the Thames, the scene of past Pony Club camps in stifling bell tents. Bron Waugh wanted to burn the barn down as a fitting end to the party but was kept in check, and we drove home in the dawn, during which a lot of snogging went on. My friend Herki Bellville remembers being embarrassed by my mother's incredibly loud voice telling us to look at various bits of interesting architecture as we hurtled through quiet villages like irresponsible Roman charioteers.

In those days when I was with my parents in public I was nearly always embarrassed – just like my children and even grandchildren are with me. When did embarrassment first attack? Was it when my mother drove me (a plaited eleven-year-old) to the local point-to-point in the trolley cart when all my friends went in cars? I certainly remember hiding under the rugs in the back when she kept calling out at the top of her voice to passers-by, 'Don't we look nice?' as we wove through the streets of Wantage.

I was too embarrassed to cry on the last train from Paddington to Plymouth nearly half a century later. *Why aren't there more people crying in the street?* I wrote in my diary on 23 July 1999. *Why is there no one crying on this*

train? The sun never looked so bright red and glowing like fire in the sky as we whizz past Newbury. Two days before, Rupert had set off on the annual Cornish holiday – the car brimful of surfboards, groceries and wetsuits – to join our five children, six grandchildren, sundry spouses and friends. The highlight of our year. We had rented several converted steadings at Roscarrock, a settled and ancient farm whose land slopes down to the sea between Port Quin and Port Isaac. I had told the children that I needed to stay behind to finish an article but would join them within a day or two. Only Rupert knew I was seeing the doctor.

The locum who was standing in for my GP in the Shrivenham surgery felt my right breast and said, 'I think you should see a surgeon as soon as possible.' He sent a fax to the breast surgeon at the Churchill Hospital in Oxford and it fell into an empty office. I rang his number and got voice mail. He was on leave. I rang the Churchill Hospital receptionist and she told me to ring another doctor. I rang the other doctor, whose secretary said: 'Are you already a patient?' 'No.' 'Well, I suggest you ring your GP.' I rang the locum, who had already gone home. It was four p.m. Emboldened by awareness of my medical insurance I rang the Lister Hospital in London, and asked to speak to a celebrated breast surgeon about whom I'd read. He was on leave. Never, ever, get cancer in the summer holidays. His stand-in, however, who I was assured was very practised at breast surgery but who specialized in melanomas, could see me tomorrow. He was genuinely kind and reassuring and I liked him.

Twenty-four hours later he holds a picture of my right breast up to the seven p.m. light over Chelsea. 'This bit here [he points to a white octopus among the grey matter] looks very suspicious. I'm afraid I don't like the look of it at all.' A wave of shock curls up above my head and crashes and booms down through my body. 'We won't get the biopsy

results until Monday, so you can go and have a nice family holiday.' Is he mad?

I walk out of the Lister at eight p.m. on a Friday and sit on the steps, caught in a nowhere of suspended reality. My mobile weighs heavily in my pocket. A taxi passes carrying a happy young man full of hope towards Clapham. I imagine the girl he will meet in the wine bar later. I can't bring myself to ring Rupert, my lifeline. The pain will be too acute.

I ring Tory Oaksey, my friend and childhood heroine who used to win all the show-jumping competitions and knows no fear on a horse. She is an artist now. I picture her in my old village of Farnborough, where she has come to live next to Maureen and Janet Carter's old house, looking onto the cornfield. Today the cornfield is gigantic. The hedges have been grubbed up to form a prairie, eight fields rolled into one, and Maureen Carter is the Mayoress of Highworth near Swindon. My school playground of fifty years ago has become a shrub-filled garden, the 'offices' – which was how we referred to the pair of outdoor lavatories – are now a garden shed, and the big schoolroom where we made wool bobbles using milk-bottle tops, learned to read Mr Lobb books and sang 'Down in the Valley' is full of a stranger's armchairs, sofas, magazines and friends.

Tory and I always laugh a lot together. As she answers, my situation becomes reality. So now I cry.

'Do you want me to ring Rupert?'

'No, *I* will.'

There is no mobile signal at Roscarrock. The only landline is in the great granite farmhouse away from the small lawn which looks west, down over the high-walled cornfields to Port Quin, where all our children, together with our friends the Bannermans and the St Clairs, are probably shrieking with laughter and eating spaghetti and drinking wine. I picture Kate Sloman, the calm farmer's wife who used to be a nurse, crossing the yard to tell Rupert there is a call and

how he will gingerly slope across the cobbles in the fading light.

‘I’ll meet you at Plymouth; it’ll be all right.’

‘I can’t face the children,’ I say.

Rupert arranges for us to stay with our old friend Peregrine St Germans at Port Eliot, a few Cornish valleys away from Roscarrock.

There are few people on the train. I try and read Madame Bovary but find myself inadvertently staring at the couple on the other side of the divide, who are newly in love. Every now and then I look out to see where we are by the line of hills or the islanded mounds in the darkening Somerset Levels. I know the journey so well and I badly want to cry. Rupert gathers me up at an empty midnight Plymouth Station and everything is all right. I feel all right in his arms.

We drive to Port, down on the Tiddy estuary, a familiar harbour from any storm, up whose meandering fern-edged drive my father first drove my mother and me in our old Vauxhall in the summer of 1954. Back then, after wandering through dark halls and passages we found Peregrine’s seemingly ancient grandparents playing pontoon on the floor in a huge round room. The light poured in through three full-length, gently curved windows facing out across the park. (My mother said later she was shocked that they could be gambling on a Sunday.) Peregrine and I went and climbed into the tree house and explored the woods beside the estuary. ‘I hope you are keeping well,’ he wrote to me the next autumn term. ‘I have bitten my tongue so hard that it is twice as thick as it usually is. It is most uncomfortable. I play for the under 15 House side. Here is a photo of me do send a piece [sic] of your hair if you can. We found your coat in the house in the tree.’ It was an emerald-green tweed riding coat – made by Collards in Swindon at my mother’s insistence – which I had tried to lose on purpose.