

The Gathering

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“Mum says we’re going to Exmoor!”

Emily was red-faced with excitement, the news bursting from her.

“We’re going to stay in a caravan, and there’s a stream, and I might RIDE a REAL EXMOOR pony!”

She danced across the cracked concrete, spinning with joy, her plastic hair bobbles bouncing and clicking.

“And it’s all down to you, Mr Bracken,” she said, coming to a stop by the pony dozing in his homemade shelter. Suddenly quiet, she laid her face gently against his hairy cheek and breathed in his warm, dusty smell.

Bracken was old and kind and cunning. He could steal treats from deep inside your pockets, digging them out with his prehensile top lip. If he didn’t feel like being ridden, he would wait until you weren’t looking before untying his rope, rolling under the straggles of electric fence and escaping back into his field.

He was called Bracken because his coat was the same reddish-brown as bracken on the winter moor. Not that there were any moors on the outskirts of Birmingham where Emily lived. Just roads, houses and flat fields of polythene with pylons striding through.

“Exmoor,” Emily sighed into Bracken’s mane. “Actual Exmoor, where you came from.”

“I don’t know that for sure,” said Val, Bracken’s owner. She smiled at Emily.

“He’s got no papers and at his age, if he was moor-bred, he would have a brand.”

“Don’t care,” said Emily fiercely. “You can see what he is. Look at his eyes.”

It was true that Bracken had the typical Exmoor mealy-coloured eye patches and muzzle. In the summer, his coat was short and glossy but when autumn came he grew a double coat of thick, soft wool overlaid with a longer, greasy pelt. A rain-shedding fan of stiff, waterproof hair sheltered the base of his abundant black tail. He never needed a rug and would stand quite happily in the rain, rump to the wind, droplets running off his whiskers.

“Silly old sausage,” thought Val. As a child she’d fantasised about owning a palomino Arab stallion, a wild horse that only she could ride. Forty years on, the dream had solidified into this aged gelding, safe enough for anyone. She wouldn’t have chosen differently; there was a wise spark deep in Bracken’s hooded eyes. They’re called “toad eyes”, Val remembered. Folklore said real toads had a jewel in their heads. Bracken sighed, shifted his hips and tilted his near-hind hoof. “You’re my jewel,” thought Val.

Val first noticed Emily in February. Every evening when she got out of her car to unlock the field gate, there was a kid hanging about, aged about 10 or 11, wearing leggings and a pink jacket. The girl shied away when looked at, like some untrained yearling.

Most of the teens who hung out on the wasteground at the back of the estate weren’t interested in horses. This kid was different. She’d stand alone, staring silently. Val recognised that look of utter longing for impossible treasure.

On the fourth evening, Val rode Bracken up the track to the village. The girl was lurking by the hedge, pretending to check her phone.

‘Hi there,” called Val as they passed, “would you like to stroke him?”

The kid did a good pretence of a double-take and then shrugged nonchalantly as if she wasn't bothered, but her radiant expression told otherwise.

At first she was clumsy and her movements too abrupt. But Bracken was patient. Over time, Emily learned to put on his headcollar, lead him in and groom him. She helped Val poo-pick, frowning with disgust at his grassy boluses, amazed by the metallic-bronze dung beetles that rattled like popcorn in the wheelbarrow.

"Euew, gross!" became a catchphrase, a kind of secret joke between them. Emily learned to keep her attention on Bracken, forgetting her phone messages. Val learned that Emily had an annoying younger brother called Leo ("euew, gross!") and a dad, who lived elsewhere.

One spring Saturday when dandelion flowers were scattered like gold coins through the grass, Val lent Emily her crash hat and let her ride up the track and back. Soon she could rise to the trot and coax Bracken into a slow canter round the field.

But it wasn't really riding, just going 50 yards to the road, and Bracken was lazy when ridden in the field. Although Emily begged to take him through the village and into the woods, Val always refused. "I'm not insured to let you out on him," she explained. "The traffic is too dangerous and I can't take the risk, I'm sorry."

At home in their poky flat, Emily spent hours on her phone finding out about Exmoor. The more she learned, the more entranced she became. It wasn't just about the ponies, it was the high heathland, the steep wooded valleys she learned to call "coombes", red deer stags with enormous, branching antlers, tumbling streams with mossy fairy pools, and a rocky coast with beaches of pink-grey pebbles.

"I *will* go there," she whispered. "And I'm going to gallop over the moor, on an Exmoor."

Emily had never been on holiday. Now and then, her mum's brother, Mike, took them for a day out in his car. So it was a big moment when her mum suddenly announced that they were going to a chalet in Skegness owned by one of Mike's pals.

"It will cost a bit, but not as much as normal, and I've been saving," said Mum. "We can go to the beach, and there are donkeys – you'll like that Emily."

Emily, however, was heartbroken. "I don't want to go to Skeggy and ride a donkey," she sobbed, "why can't we go to Exmoor so I can ride an actual *pony*?"

Her mum was confounded, and then furious: "You ungrateful little cow, all you do is moan. You're spoilt you are." That night, Emily cried herself to sleep.

But the week before the holiday, Mike had some bad news. The chalet boiler had broken and they couldn't stay there after all.

"I'm ever-so sorry," he said. "I'd take you all somewhere else, but everywhere will be booked up now."

It was Emily's moment. All those furtive hours on the internet were going to pay off. "There's this place," she said, waving her phone. "It's really cheap – we could go there."

"Let's have a look," said Mike.

"Hmm, basic. It's not a campsite, just a farm. Might be OK ... Where is it? Bloody hell, it's miles away, right down in the sodding westcounty!"

"Please Mike, *please*, you said you'd take us somewhere," begged Emily.

Mike rang the farm. It turned out they'd had a late cancellation. He managed to bargain them down to the same price the chalet would have cost. This

achievement pleased him, and he agreed to drive there. "I got a mate in Helston. Might go on to see him for a few days, pick you up on the way back."

And so Emily, Leo and Mum went to Exmoor. Their home for the week was an old, dark-green static, perched at the top of a vertiginous, grassy field. A hill bulked up behind. At the bottom of the field there was a stream, which rushed and tumbled loudly at night. In the early mornings, ravens flew over the caravan, croaking like corks being pulled. There were noisy sheep and swallows that skimmed low over the pasture, catching insects. Leo was amazed to find a toad crouching in the damp stone wall by the water tap.

Without a car they couldn't go far. They lived on pasta and crisps from the tiny village shop, half an hour's walk away. One day, they caught a bus, which rumbled and bumped across the hills to Minehead.

It was wonderful, like being dropped into a new world, but Emily didn't see any Exmoor ponies, not one.

Two nights before they were due to go home, Mike turned up. He'd had a good time in Cornwall and earned a bit of cash working for a friend. He arrived with four aromatic bags of Chinese takeaway. "Proper food at last," thought Emily, hungrily.

They sat round the caravan table and gorged themselves. "Quite a family gathering," said Mike.

He pointed his plastic fork at Emily: "I got a treat lined up for you. You're going riding tomorrow, just like you wanted. There's a place up on the moor. Exmoor ponies. I stopped off on the way and booked you in."

Emily hardly slept all night. In her imagination she saw a black mane waving over her hands as they cantered – no galloped – across miles of heather.

There was the usual kerfuffle about leaving the caravan and by the time they arrived at the stables, most of the riders were already mounted. Emily's gaze flicked over a line of dozy piebald and skewbald cobs. "My pony must be in the stable," she thought.

She collected a hat and while Mum filled in various forms, a teenager led her to one of the cobs. "You're on Tinker."

Emily was confused. "Don't you have any Exmoors?" she asked.

"Course not. Not for trekking. Get on; we're starting in a moment. Stirrups OK? Tuck his head in behind Domino over there."

During the ride, Tinker paid no attention whatsoever to Emily. His main concern was to snatch mouthfuls of greenery. The string ambled slowly in single-file up a tarmac lane, took a path by the side of a wood and then for ten glorious minutes went along a stony track on the moor.

At the very last moment, the ride supervisor asked, "does anyone want to canter?" Some horses lurched into a few lacklustre strides before subsiding back into a walk. Tinker refused to do more than trot. Then they returned to the stables.

Emily hid her disappointment well. She knew it wasn't Mike or Mum's fault they didn't understand that a pony on Exmoor was not the same as an Exmoor pony. She had ridden a pony on Exmoor - she was lucky to have had such a treat.

When they left to go home the next day, Emily could hardly see through unshed tears. Mike chose to detour across the moor. At Brendon Common the road was lined with parked cars and people were standing on the verges looking at something in the distance. Mike pulled into a layby next to an old, stout guy in a waxed coat.

“What’s happening?” he called.

The man beamed. “It’s the Gathering. We’re getting the ponies in for checking.”

Everyone piled out of the car, squinting into the sun.

Then Emily saw them. They were far away and it was as if some of the purple-brown heather had started to move. They came nearer, flowing down the hillside, urged on by girls on horseback and young men on leaping quad bikes. Through a shallow ford in rainbows of spray to meet with other groups, running at a canter now, mares and stocky foals, nostrils wide. One mare tried to break away and lead her herd back to the ridge, but a girl on a bay hunter swooped in and chased her off.

Down the road they came, snorting and calling, unshod hooves tapping, a pell-mell tumult of tossing manes, shiny-coated bodies dappled with summer condition, a river of Exmoor ponies.

As they passed Emily let out a long breath. Real Exmoor ponies, galloping on Exmoor. Yes, she envied the authoritative girls riding the round-up on their hunters, so casual and so unimaginably blessed. But it was the free-running Exmoors that stole her heart.

“Time to go,” said Mike. “As I said yesterday, it’s been quite a gathering.” He looked at Emily: “Something to tell your friend’s skanky old nag about.”

Emily was too engrossed in her own thoughts to respond. She was whispering a promise: “One day, I will come back, and I *will* ride an Exmoor on Exmoor.”