

## **Wilderness: In Search of Belonging**

An extract from a memoir by Sanjida O'Connell

I dreamed of being a novelist and a zoologist when I was five years-old and I was living in Nigeria. It wasn't the first time I'd lived in the country. The first time, I was there from when I turned one until I was two years old. I have a couple of photos of me from that time, which I love.

In one, I'm wearing a dress only just long enough to cover my bottom, my baby hair neat and straight, in two tiny bunches, no sign of the frizz and the curl that would later frustrate my mother. I'm next to a row of African marigolds with my arm around my dog Timmy who, seated, is almost the same height as me.

The other picture is of me and two men. The man who is holding me is dark-skinned, with a large nose and kind eyes. He's wearing a white, sleeveless shirt. His hair is cut short to his scalp, but you can still see the Afro kink.

The other man, solid, white, beaming, his hair as black as boot polish, is in a cassock with a collar.

A Catholic priest and a Muslim mathematician.

My two fathers. I look rather cross in the photo.

When I was growing up, a brown child raised by a white family, the only non-white person everywhere I lived, at every school I went to, my ceaseless question was: 'Where do I belong?' I didn't have a place I could point to and say, 'there, that's where I'm from.'

My stepfather quoted Virginia Woolf to me: 'As a woman, I have no country. As a woman, I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world.'

He spoke eloquently and passionately of Irish writers, like James Joyce and William Butler Yeats, who felt disenfranchised, standing apart from their own land and peoples and, as a result of their perceived outsider status, became better writers.

But being a citizen of the world, whilst possibly helping one become a better writer, does not make one happy.

## Somerset – July

We stand together in a row in the field – my husband Jaimie, our daughter Jasmine and I, like some kind of sad and truncated von Trapp family, and look down at the house we've bought. It's sunk into the bottom of the valley, long and low and ugly, engulfed by a sinuous wisteria and a vigorous kiwi. It's all tiny rooms, narrow windows, dark shadows. Jasmine and the local children, bonding in that instantaneous way only children can, have already found a secret passage from the back of a cupboard in the kitchen leading into the hall. The kiwi is muscular – you can almost sense it squeezing into our new home – with thick boughs and twisted tendrils wrapping themselves around the empty house like a fairy tale briar, squeezing the life out of it.

We think we might have to hack our way in like a fairy tale prince – and indeed, later on, this is exactly what we will do, carrying our sleeping daughter in her pyjamas as we slash our way through the growth engulfing the house, scaling the rocky hillside and taking a treacherous passage over a decaying wooden bridge so we can clamber in via a second floor window.

But that's not what we're looking at right now. We've been so focused on buying this house and our ideas for renovating it – transforming it into a modern, light-filled, glass-walled and cedar-clad box – our plans outlined on a napkin in the local pub over

a pint with an architect friend – that we had forgotten something. We had dreamt of fresh air away from inner city Bristol, of space and peace, of community and kindness, long walks and wilderness. Now, standing in an overrun field in our waterproofs in the rain, we realise our error.

The house has come with added extras. The valley is steep-sided and we now own the land on either side. It's bisected by a bridlepath – the West Mendip Way – and a stream. On one side we have a large, wide garden stretched along the valley bottom, adjacent to a small field and stables. Opposite, is another, larger field, with a wood at each end. The field and the trees form an island, completely encircled by a footpath. The plans had confused our mortgage brokers because they showed not one property, the one we were intent on buying, but ten.

We are surrounded by a ghost village. There are the remnants of another nine houses on our land, some little more than a rocky outcrop in the middle of the field, others two storeys high, with parts of the walls, doors, and fireplaces remaining. There is a lime kiln at one end. We can feel the history of the place running so very close to the surface, no more than a spade's depth below the surface, like raised veins beneath skin.

The previous owners had ponies. Now, without the horses, but enriched by years of manure, the field has bolted. The grass is thick and lush, rank and choked with nettles and covered with ferns a metre high. Water drips from their fronds and our hoods. Our wellies are submerged in dock leaves that lap across our feet like a green wave. We have gone back in time: we expect giant dragonflies to helicopter past, pterosaurs to swoop overhead. The woods are darkly claustrophobic: a rotten fence separates them from the field but, in any case, like the century-old briar in *Sleeping Beauty*, they're so overgrown they're impenetrable.

Jaimie and I look at each other.

What have we done?

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The grass is taller than me. It is whirring and thrumming, chirping and rustling, alive with the chitinous rasp of mandibles and wings, pincers and piercers and probes. I shut my eyes and tell myself to walk in, to force my way through the thicket to be amongst the insects.

*I need to do it.*

We live in Nigeria and at night I sleep under a mosquito net. I have bad dreams about giant spiders crawling across the net, trying to get in. I'm five years old. I already know that I want to be a novelist and a zoologist. But I can't. I can't cross into that alien insect world.

I'm not brave enough.

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One of the main reasons for moving out of the city was to give our daughter an idyllic life in the countryside and to get her into a good school. We've deliberately come to this particular part of Somerset because Professor James O'Connell, my stepfather and Jasmine's grandfather, founded a department of Peace Studies at the local school. It's housed in two yurts in a field, which is named after him – the *James O'Connell Peace Field*. I don't think it's what he would have expected. He died just before it opened. I gave the keynote speech wearing a pink dress and gold converses in a tent in a field and my mum cut the ribbon across the muddy track leading to the yurts, looking cross and confused. Jasmine, then four, picked clover and buttercups and stuck them on a cardboard crown. I imagine my Dad would have raised his eyebrows and smiled. But where better for Jasmine to be educated (although maybe not in the field itself)? She doesn't quite see it that way. Worse, she tells us how unhappy she is. She doesn't want

to leave her friends, her primary school, the house she was born in and, she says, there are way too many bugs.

We spend the summer visiting the house every weekend before the builders are due to start work in the autumn. There is no road; instead we have to bump along a stony bridlepath designed for horses. The verges, a froth of cow parsley and red campion, brush against the sides of the car, and the hedge is so high, we are enveloped on all sides. We cross a bridge over the stream and push past the kiwi to get inside.

Jaimie and I do our best to keep on top of the vegetation threatening to swamp the place. We have come from inner city Bristol; our garden is the size of a large dinner table, covered in pale grey shale with beautiful plants in strategic places and the tiniest of ponds in an old tin bathtub. Jaimie calls it his gin and tonic garden: you can hold a glass with one hand and snip stray fronds with the other. Now we own three acres of land. There is nothing gin and tonic like about our new place.

I forage for raspberries and red currants in the overgrown garden and it reminds me of my childhood in Nigeria – a dense wall of canes popping with crickets and ants and green shield bugs. Wild strawberries creep across the ground and crab-spiders and

snails, their translucent shells the colour of mint granita, hide beneath the leaves. Jasmine refuses to help me.

We put up camping chairs in the kitchen and cook on a one-ringed burner. We coppice hazel and lay fires in a grand stone fireplace before selling it on eBay. We celebrate my birthday with coffee cake at the camping table, the room wreathed in white smoke, drinking prosecco out of plastic mugs. We watch the sun sink behind the small-leaved lime: the valley is so steep-sided that at a certain point in the evening the light is funnelled straight through, as if a huge studio light has been turned on and beamed into the garden. We sleep on the floor in one room in the house, the only one that will not be renovated, glamping amongst stacks of cardboard boxes containing our possessions.

Jasmine is seven years old. She refuses to leave this room and spends her time colouring. She's bemused by the idea of playing outside. What would she do? I'm frustrated – Jaimie needs me to help him, but I can't leave her on her own all the time. I thought she would love spending her weekends in the countryside, splashing in the stream and making up stories set in the wilderness as I used to do.



But, of course, she's spent her entire life living in the city. The wildest place she has known until now is the urban nature reserve behind our old house: a scrap of land bisected by train tracks, littered with beer cans, fringed with crabbed hawthorns. She has never learnt to play outside.

What's worse is that I have made her fear of the great outdoors more acute. At the start of the summer, when we were exploring the garden together, Jasmine and I pushed our way through a thorny thicket, and found a hidden path cut into the hillside behind the house. When we emerged, we were covered in ticks. I'd never seen them before and started screaming. We didn't know how to remove them and I still have scars from where Jaimie gouged them out with the tweezers on his penknife.

Back in Bristol I googled ticks, my zoological interest with these creatures vying with my disgust. I discovered that they're a type of parasitic spider that suck blood, wandering round the host to find the softest skin, before cutting a hole and inserting their mouth parts. Their saliva contains anticoagulants that stop the blood clotting. They have to be carefully removed with special tick tweezers; on no account tear the body in half and leave the mouth parts behind as we did. Using a lit match or petroleum jelly to remove them makes them stressed and then they vomit their stomach contents, which are full of bacteria, into your bloodstream.

One of the types of bacteria they can carry is *Lyme borreliosis*, responsible for Lyme disease. It can cause swelling of the joints, nerve problems, difficulty with concentration and memory loss, and end up producing symptoms similar to chronic fatigue syndrome. In this part of Somerset, one in twenty five ticks carry the bacteria for Lyme Disease. Our two closest neighbours have both had it and spent months dragging themselves through everyday life, zombie-tired, their bones aching.

Over the next few weeks we watch *The Walking Dead* and I am so anxious, I have recurring nightmares of a post-apocalyptic world where we encounter monstrous, blood-sucking ticks as big as Alsatians in the woods behind our new house. In my dreams, I try and fight them off with a pine branch, but they're impossible to kill. I don't want to tell my sister about the ticks in case she refuses to bring her family to visit.

I start to think we've made a terrible mistake.

But then something happens that makes me reconsider.

Just before the builders move in, Jaimie empties the house of our camping equipment and locks up the room where our things are being stored. It's late by the time he

finishes. I'm in London, meeting my publishers, and while I'm on the train home, he calls me, his voice filled with strain. The stream has flooded the bridlepath and he and Jasmine are stuck outside the house. He leaves Jasmine in the car on the drive just above the waterline. There is no mobile signal so he has to climb the nearest hill to call me but he's cut off and I can't get through to him again.

I do the only thing I can think of: I call one of our new neighbours, Jacqui. She's not pleased to hear from me. At the Parish Council meeting she gave an emotional and impassioned speech against our proposed renovations. She's abrupt on the phone and hangs up without saying goodbye. Half an hour later she drives her Range Rover through the flood and rescues my husband and daughter. I add '4 wheel drive' to the list of items we're going to need when we move out of the city centre.

I'm unused to people – particularly people I have had a disagreement with – dropping everything to help simply because we will be their neighbours. And I think that perhaps, just perhaps, we have not made such a monumental mistake after all.

Dr Sanjida O'Connell has had four non-fiction books, and eight novels published. She writes psychological thrillers as Sanjida Kay. *Bone by Bone*, *The Stolen Child*, *My Mother's Secret* and *One Year Later* were published by Corvus Books; *The Divide* was published in *The Book of Bristol* by Comma Press, and *The Beautiful Game* in *The Perfect Crime*, was published by HarperCollins.

Sanjida has been shortlisted for the **BBC Asia Awards**, the **Betty Trask Award for Romantic Fiction**, the **Daily Telegraph Science Writer's Award**, **Asian Woman of the Year**, highly commended for **BBC Wildlife Magazine's Award for Nature Writing**, long listed for a **CWA Steel Dagger** and shortlisted for a **CWA Short Story Dagger**.

Sanjida is currently writing a nature memoir, *Wilderness: In Search of Belonging*, about growing up dual-heritage in rural Britain, and rewilding a patch of land in Somerset. *Wilderness* is being serialised on substack:

<https://sanjidakay.substack.com/s/wilderness>

A recording of this text can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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