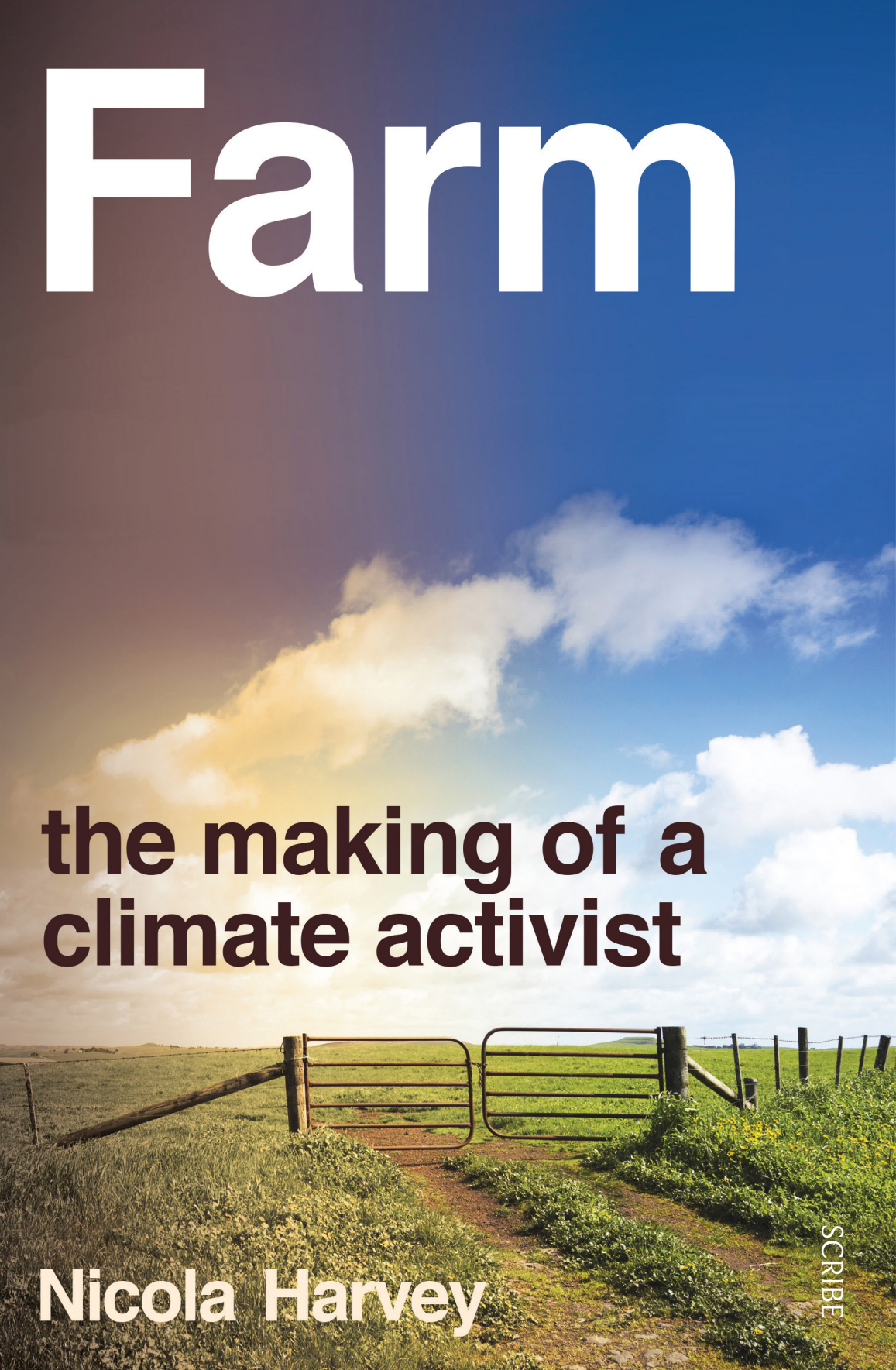
Farm

the making of a climate activist



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SCRIBE

Introduction

I ate corn chips during my miscarriage. Sitting cross-legged on the shedding cream carpet in front of my double bed as dappled sunlight flowed and receded through the sheer linen IKEA curtains, I sucked the salt and tangy flavouring off each chip and crunched through the waves of pain. Hours later, I curled on the bed and closed my eyes. A rumble of hunger was the only thing cutting through my numbness. Next door, in the spare bedroom, my husband, Pat, lay on the floor, his head propped up on a pillow, listening to Tropical Fuck Storm then You Am I, King Gizzard, Magic Dirt, then someone else playing something else. The hum and patter of voices and guitars soaked through the wall. He slept there, on the floor. What else was there to do but close your eyes and wish it all away?

For almost three weeks, I held what was once a life with a beating heart in my body. During my lunch break one day, I was told by an Irish woman with an ultrasound machine that my baby no longer had a heartbeat. 'I'll be back in a moment, love,' she'd said, as I lay there in the orange glow, shielding my eyes from the screen. A second opinion was sought. But it only confirmed the first. For the next three weeks, in an apricot-coloured nook outside an obstetrician's office at Sydney's Prince Alfred Hospital, I existed in a liminal zone: I was neither pregnant, like those around me, nor not. I sat for hours, waiting for someone to tell me about a pill or procedure, or

to remind me there was no heartbeat. And I was constantly hungry, had been for months; just over three to be exact, since I'd learned I was pregnant. For the first time in my life, I had a constant growl of want deep within me, and I satisfied every craving.

When I visited the hospital emergency room for the final time, it was just past 8am on a Monday and the hunger hadn't gone — it was my only constant companion. I had asked Pat not to come. The miscarriage was our loss, but it was my burden, and I squashed the grief alone in the time it took a taxi to drive from the hospital to my office at Sydney's Circular Quay. I was at work by ten, quieter, pale. And I started to see fault in everything. What I ate became a source of obsession, and questions about taste and texture were replaced with bigger thoughts about whether I was leeching on the world.

Beneath it all, I was whispering: *what did I do to deserve this?*

The shared lunch ordered for staff who rarely left their desks was spread on the kitchen table like a perverse offering: a pile of couscous salad on one plate, creamy red cabbage coleslaw on another. Tangy shredded chicken, slow-cooked lamb, buckets of hummus, piles of flat breads — a Lebanese-inspired feast for staff who only picked at the food. Half went into the fridge, and then into the rubbish bin the next day. Wasted.

One evening, my dad called to say, 'You should come home.' For more than 17 years I had lived abroad: first Melbourne and then Sydney, with a few years in London between. Australia felt like my home as much as the country I was born in — New Zealand (Aotearoa) — did. But it's also the place that fuelled a rabid ambition, which crumbled that August afternoon as the light was dancing and Magic Dirt was playing. Australia had burned me out. Consumed by to-do lists and outrage, I didn't know to stop when my body needed me to, and so my body did the most callous thing it could — it gave up on our baby.

When my dad said *come home, you can work on the farm. You*

and Pat can rear calves, it's a good way to start, I didn't know what he was suggesting. All I knew was it would be something different. I spent the first few years of my life on a farm, but despite that and my family's connection to the land — my divorced parents have both farmed and come from land-owning farming families — I have long embraced the rural–urban stereotype: the city is a place of culture and innovation; rural communities are conservative and culpable for vast amounts of environmental degradation. I had run to the invigorating embrace of the city as soon as I was able.

Pat was also burned out. Bent, exhausted, and pissed off, he agreed to move away from Sydney, his friends, his life for the same reason I did. He needed a reason to stop the 70-hour weeks, the Thursday nights that ended with a beer in front of the computer at 10pm. The Friday nights that ended with him falling asleep on the couch at 8pm. When we first met, he was an open-faced boy in second-hand Levi's and a plaid cotton shirt who bounced up gutters and into the nearest open band-room door. Back then he was fuelled by something that we had since squashed in our pursuit of … what was it? Money? Security? Accolades?

So, we said yes. To what? Rearing calves was the offer, though we didn't really know what that meant. We told people we were leaving to go cattle farming. To be farmers, food producers. I pictured vegetables in a garden, meat from the farm in the freezer, a life guided by food from the land around me. But I was naive. What I should have asked then was, 'How do you get closer to your food when the entire food-production system is guided by global commodities?'

Cattle farming is just one small part of a complex commodity system that dominates the Western world's food supply, a consequence of both colonial history and the Green Revolution.[1] When food was scarce in the wake of two world wars and global hunger was spotlighted as a national security issue, the global community decided collective

action was needed and the United States responded with a burst of innovative technology — specifically, seed modification.[2] This technology was perfected in the late 1950s and distributed across the world in the 1960s, and it resulted in the global embrace of higher-yielding crops driven by irrigation and newly invented synthetic agrochemicals. The Green Revolution allowed communities to grow more food, but, with devastating efficiency, the system also homogenised the field and our palate.[3]

What do you taste when you think of the global palate? I long thought my cooking was reflective of the tastes of Sydney — a city rich with spices and flavours from elsewhere made local by migration — but in truth the city is a totem of the global food system that started with targeted plant breeding. Across the world, micronutrient-rich endemic crops and vegetables were replaced with just four crops: wheat, maize corn, rice,[4] and soy.[5] By 2009, wheat was the dominant crop grown in the world and remains so still.[6] In Sydney, I could stop off at Woolworths on my way home from the office to pick up tomatoes, basmati rice, and saffron for a paella. Easy access props up this global food system, and food is a luxury, a salve.

What meaning do you ascribe to food? Is it a symbol of culture, community, jobs, justice, environment? Or is it just about taste? Food has meaning at Pat's and my table: it squashes for a moment the sadness that started with our loss and grew as I surveyed the horizon. Yet before it gets to the table, it is really only one thing — a tradeable commodity with a trade price set in advance and far away from the place where it is grown.[7] Beef slots into this system seamlessly.

At dinner, not long before we left Sydney, a close friend joked to her new date that we were running off to New Zealand to keep chickens and grow vegetables. The image my friend conjured is of a lifestyle — a few acres with some land, a cow, a pig, and a few chickens. I blushed hot and snapped back: 'It's a real farm.' We're moving to a 130-hectare cattle farm. A leased farm, not an inheritance. A

business, not a family tradition. Big enough for it to be enough.

I'm going to be a cattle farmer.

I want to prove I'm not dropping out or quitting. The farm is just another challenge. I want to prove to all those who are amused, and assume we'll be back before the year is out, that I am strong enough to succeed.

I spent years working my way up in the media industry, through magazine publishing, then the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and finally BuzzFeed. From assistant roles to editorships and executive positions, I thought of myself as a quiet operative in the glass-ceiling war, but really I was outraged by everything and nothing. The media game was exhausting and bankrupt. I was drained and muted. So, we said yes to becoming farmers in December, and we moved in February.

When people ask why we did it, I say with all earnestness that I wanted to be a farmer so I could produce food — the one thing that had filled me up, brought me pleasure, made me whole again after the miscarriage. I wanted to be close to the root of it all. But equally, I did it to prove other people wrong. My dad, who suggested it as a joke and thought we wouldn't last; my friend, who thought it was a lifestyle choice; my former colleagues, who thought I was giving up; and everyone else who told me there's no such thing as a meat-eating environmentalist — although that part came later.

A few months before I fell pregnant, I flew to New York for a work trip. BuzzFeed is headquartered on East 18th Street in Manhattan, and it had been decided that a few face-to-face meetings might be useful, as there's a limit to what can be communicated on internal chat platforms. Hungover with jet lag, I sat one morning at a table with the then editor-in-chief, Ben Smith, and chatted about our editorial priorities for the year ahead. I pitched an idea to cover climate change in a new way. The Standing Rock protests were

happening 2,600 kilometres west in South Dakota. Thousands of people protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline had been demonstrating at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation for almost a year, and they'd come from all over the world to do it. BuzzFeed had sent reporters to cover the protests. *What if we expanded that beat to Australia*? I said. *Cover climate change and environmental change through land rights*? *No one cares*, Ben replied. And he was right. News about environmental degradation was hard to sell no matter the packaging. Standing Rock disbanded, people kept driving their cars to work, flying away to holidays, consuming, eating, consuming more. Life went on. So did climate change.

I walked downtown to meet a friend at Dudley's, an Australian bistro on Orchard Street that served delicious avocado toast. He was over from Paris for work, one of dozens of flights he'd take that year. We had lived together in Melbourne in 2006, and then I had left for London and he'd moved north to Fitzroy. That same year, a few people in various positions of power had started speaking passionately and publicly about the importance and danger of global warming. But neither of us paid much attention; we were 25 and our lives were opening up in front of us. I remember that Al Gore — the former United States vice president turned one-time presidential hopeful — released a film called *An Inconvenient Truth*. People watched it and were shocked and concerned by Gore's claim that we were in a 'planetary emergency', but for the most part we all went on with our daily lives as we had before. I flew to and from London twice and thought nothing of the air miles or carbon footprint.

This was also the year the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) issued a report titled Livestock's Long Shadow proclaiming that rearing cattle produces more greenhouse gases than driving cars.[8] I missed it in 2006; it didn't get quite the same attention as An Inconvenient Truth. Two Academy Awards and US$50 million at the global box office did not follow. Instead, a raft

of bad press and the issuing of a 'technical note' were to come. But at the time of release, the report's findings were as grave and urgent as Gore's. Senior FAO official Henning Steinfeld said, 'Livestock are one of the most significant contributors to today's most serious environmental problems.'[9]

The report's researchers figured that the livestock sector (the farming of cattle, sheep, pigs, and chicken) generated *more* greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions when measured in carbon dioxide (CO2) equivalent than transport. They put the sector's total GHG contribution at 18 per cent of the world total, and the media swooped. The fossil fuels industry was no longer the only baddie in the climate change story. I remember that part — the appearance of cows in headlines where once billowing smokestacks had loomed.

Steinfeld had called for 'urgent action' but what he got was the start of an ideological battle and reductive media coverage because colleagues disagreed with the FOA team's research methods: they'd counted the cars but not the manufacturing or the road construction, for example.[10] The FOA's research was questioned, and in the years that followed it revised its calculations and issued updates that put the GHG figure for livestock farming at around 14 per cent. But the media now had a simplified version of complicated climate research: *cows are worse than cars*.

It didn't occur to me then or later that I should connect this 14 per cent to the pastime that was lifting me out of heartache. Cooking and climate change seemed like odd bedfellows, so I spent long, slow days in the kitchen, combining chilli, turmeric, cumin, coriander, and paprika with lamb, yogurt, and tomato: the start of a biryani. A pungent mix of celery, carrot, onion, garlic, mushrooms, and herbs with beef chunks and stock would reduce down to a base on which to layer fluffy, light potato, to make a pie.

I made hearty meals to soothe my searing insides. But those meals were a point on the emissions scale. That became clear to me

in 2018, when I made the decision to leave Australia to return to my other home, New Zealand. I convinced my Australian husband it would be an adventure. But the decision to quit city life to become cattle farmers dropped us amid a cluster of arguments about food and farming and its role in causing and combating climate change and the degradation of land, fresh water, air — the resources that make up our environment.

At first, I tried to win every argument I stumbled into: veganism versus meat eaters; clean food versus food tech; regenerative versus conventional farming; the North's growth versus the South's ecological scars. The battles consumed me, and very near destroyed Pat and me.

And then I stopped fighting the status quo and immersed myself in creating something new and small. This book is about how a plot of leased land in the middle of New Zealand helped me to untether from the old world, physically and emotionally. It's a book about food, farming, and climate change — our collective challenge — and how they have been co-opted by marketers and lobbyists dictating solutions. I've tried to answer every question I've heard asked: is beef bad for the environment? Is veganism the answer? Is local always better? Can food technology save us all? Is climate change *my* problem? Why is food tearing my family apart?

But it's also a book about sacrifice, because I do not see a future without us all giving up something in order to create something new, something better. That shouldn't be a cause for fear. The human impulse to break and remake afresh can result in a thing of startling beauty. This I know from looking at that sculpture for so long, from cooking food, from learning to read the land, and from the struggle to become a cattle-farming, meat-eating environmentalist.

I reached for the sky, refusing to fall beneath the surface.