

“Searing, lucid, tender, and wise, *The Year of the Horses* is a moving, beautifully written interrogation into a complicated, privileged childhood and its aftermath. Courtney Maum weaves together the sensory, tactile world of horses and their capacity to heal us, along with one of the most illuminating and powerful depictions of depression I have ever read. Oh, and it’s also a page-turner. I tore through it with immense pleasure.”

—**DANI SHAPIRO**, bestselling author of *Inheritance: A Memoir of Genealogy, Paternity, and Love*

“Gorgeously written, wry but loving, heartbreaking and, most of all, roving . . . *The Year of the Horses* is a memoir of power and beauty and pain that moves across the world like the beautiful horses that carry it.”

—**LISA TADDEO**, bestselling author of *Animal*

“Tender, honest, and beautifully written.”

—**KATE BAER**, bestselling author of *What Kind of Woman*

“If, like me at age fifty, you have a hankering to resume riding again (never mind that it’s been thirty-four years), this is the book for you. Courtney will show you her way to this particular form of personal salvation.”

—**SALLY MANN**, National Book Award finalist and author of *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*

“Courtney Maum dives into her own life with the same fearlessness and honesty that she brings to her fiction. *The Year of the Horses* is a beautiful, unflinching exploration of darkness and self-forgiveness, terror and tenderness.”

—**HALA ALYAN**, author of *The Arsonists’ City*

“Here is a book where the author writes not from an ideal of who she should be, but as she is. It lacks performative overtones or those typical bits where the reader is assured the author is self-aware. No, it’s nothing like that. *The Year of the Horses* sings like the world actually feels, it gives us permission to be who we are, and it’s written by one of the best—a writer’s writer—with a maturity that reveals her decades-long devotion to her craft.”

—**HOLLY WHITAKER**, bestselling author of *Quit Like a Woman: The Radical Choice to Not Drink in a Culture Obsessed with Alcohol*

“The concept of finding safety in a dangerous sport won’t make sense to everyone, but the way that Courtney found meaning and magic in horses resonates with me. As a polo player, I loved the sometimes laugh-out-loud journey of an adult trying against all odds to learn the sport of kings. This is a great memoir that somehow manages to be both deeply moving and funny.”

—**KAREEM ROSSER**, author of *Crossing the Line: A Fearless Team of Brothers and the Sport That Changed Their Lives Forever*

# **THE YEAR OF THE HORSES**

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**THE YEAR  
OF THE  
HORSES**

*A MEMOIR*

**COURTNEY MAUM**



TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon

ALSO BY COURTNEY MAUM

*I Am Having So Much Fun Here Without You*

*Touch*

*Costalegre*

*Before and After the Book Deal: A Writer's Guide to Finishing,  
Publishing, Promoting and Surviving Your First Book*

*For my firefighters*



*For now just remember how you felt the day you  
were born: desperate for magic, ready to love.*

—KATE BAER, *What Kind of Woman*



## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

To write this book, I returned to my child's mind and embraced its bias, its subjectivity, and its tenderness. Allowing for the indulgences of my adult memory, this is a work of nonfiction, except for a handful of names and identifying details I have changed to respect individuals' privacy.



# 1

## THE NIGHT MARE

I am standing by our front door as my daughter works her socks on. She is two years old, her blond wisps curling from exertion. The socks are pink or they are white—it doesn't matter, because they are not socks, they are the enemy.

“Just put your socks on, honey,” I say, willing mercy from the lava building up inside me. “Just pull them on.”

My daughter scrunches her face into a protest of discomfort. The toe seams have to be perfectly aligned across the tip-top of each toe. The heel pads have to fit neatly over the heels. The big-girl tugging on of my toddler's socks can take upwards of eight minutes. Every. Single. Morning.

My husband, Leo, is out scouting a location for a film he is trying to raise money for. Or he is outside on the phone begging for that money in the one spot on our dirt road where we get two bars. I have lost track of his end goal, I've lost track of where he is; it seems to me that every day is a *déjà vu* of professional instability and my daughter's war with socks. What matters, though,

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what is urgent, is that I am alone in a log cabin with a wild animal who has to put on clothes.

“*Putain*, Nina, Mama has to *go!*”

There it is, the first spout of lava. My husband is French, so when I swear in front of our daughter, I coat bad words in this foreign language, hoping it will soften their impact. Nina’s face reddens and her concentrated lips tremble: the landing wasn’t soft. I need to back off. I don’t.

“Dammit, Nina, if you could just get the damn socks on! Go barefoot! I can’t take it! Mama has to *go!*”

Nina’s dimpled hands drop to her sides. Her face collapses. She begins to sob. My heart divides: one half wants to get down and hold her, apologize for the fact that she has an impatient, desperate mother; the other wants to hurl fire from my mouth, wants to scream so loud it scares her, wants the battle of attrition with the socks and the zippers and the tomato sauce to stop.

I wrap my arms around my daughter and lift her struggling limbs into the air, my muscles straining against the fury of her temper tantrum. Grasping her shoes and shoving them under my armpit, I walk out of the house like this, my boots crunching on the autumn frost as Nina tries to kick me. I will drive her to day care barefoot. We will try again in the parking lot. We will try again.

•

“Have you taken a depression intake survey before?” asks the fledgling therapist I have chosen from a list of local providers on the World Wide Web, apparently erroneously, because there is no way I can bare my soul to a twentysomething in a Livestrong

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bracelet. Even his name—Joe—seems incongruous with the bookish sophistication I'd fantasized a therapist possessing. I shift in the plush seat that holds me like a velvet clam. Somewhere behind me, a white noise machine hisses a eucalyptus scent.

"I don't know," I answer. "I don't think so?" I look down at the sheet of questions. Father's parenting style, mother's parenting style, religious upbringing. My stomach clenches. "Or maybe once? My parents sent me to a therapist when they got divorced. Or my mother did. My mother made me."

"And you were how old?"

"Nine."

I watch him do the math: the patient who's in front of him is thirty-seven now. *See how long I stayed in working order for*, I want to say, *before the "check engine" light came on?*

He leaves the room so I can fill out the form in private. It is a long form, thick with pages. Thick with questions I would like to laugh at, but can't.

*Significant childhood experiences*

*Good/happy/positive Age Bad/negative/sad/disturbing Age*

\_\_\_\_\_ — \_\_\_\_\_ —  
\_\_\_\_\_ — \_\_\_\_\_ —

The questions are difficult to answer, too difficult and big. It is absurd, the hugeness of these questions staring up at me. They are something hard dressed up as something easy, like the password reminders that come at you out of nowhere on a Tuesday demanding the name of the best friend you ditched in elementary school, the name of your first street.

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I flip to the second page, where I navigate questions about my sleep, which is nonexistent. Do I feel bad about myself? Do I feel like I am a failure and/or have let my family down? If I have little interest and pleasure in doing things, do I experience these feelings: Nearly every day? More than half the days? Do I have trouble concentrating? Do I have thoughts of hurting myself?

“The trees want me to drive into them” isn’t an option on the intake form, so I answer “Nearly every day,” instead. The therapist comes back into the scented office, and it’s my turn to leave the room while he evaluates my answers in the whirl of his white lair. When I come back in, he’s flushed. The chair holds me even tighter. He tells me that my answers are the answers of someone with a severe case of depression. Is there someone who can escort me home? He doesn’t think that I should drive.

•

At thirty-seven, I did not know what depression looked like, but I refused to admit that it could look like me: a woman with a mortgage and a helpful husband and a healthy child and a beloved family pet buried in the yard. That I felt sadness was undeniable, but I felt no right to claim it. My sadness was like an abandoned case shuddering around the black wrap of a baggage belt. How I wanted to pretend that it was someone else’s baggage. Depression? Not my depression. Can’t happen to me.

But the despair was fully mine. It kept me from absorbing nutrients. It sat on my chest at night. For months I had been suffering from an insomnia so debilitating that I’d moved into

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the guest room so that Leo could do the thing I hated and envied him for: sleep.

I had been at my happiest at thirty-five. That age was right behind me. An age where I could stare into my daughter's face all day and bleep and squint and gurgle back at her own gurgles, revel at the make-up of her kneecap, the fact that she had hands. Put as much care into the pureeing of beets as I did into the plotting of a novel; tick off the list of "must-haves" for a car ride with the attention of a surgeon general.

But when Nina turned two, everything changed. Her needs became vast and existential: no longer did I tower over her disgruntlements wondering, Is she hot? Hungry? Too cold? All of a sudden, she wanted entertainment. She wanted meaning, reason, proof. Nina wanted a form of love that was far beyond the planned care I'd shown up until that point. *Look at how I love you because I provide* needed to turn into *look at how I love you because I am dropping everything to play*, and at thirty-seven, I did not know how to play, because somehow, my ability to be comfortable in joy had left my heart and body.

On the way home from that first visit to the therapist's, the trees didn't beckon me to drive outside the dividing lines. Instead, I saw my mother's finger on a map of South Carolina, a game we used to play when we were in the summer house that my father didn't come to anymore. We would stand at the dining room table with our eyes closed, my mother's right hand out. I'd spin her around twice, and she'd drop her finger somewhere on the map. Large city or small city, in the middle of everything or nowhere, it didn't matter, we would drive there. Car snacks and water bottles were the extent of our planning. We'd get in the car and we would

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drive, and when we got to the spot that her finger had selected on the map, we would find a place to eat lunch, and then we would head back. It would take all day, sometimes, these spontaneous explorations. I don't remember us having heart-to-heart talks on our miniature road trips, although I do remember my mother trying to protect me from disappointment by laughing if we discovered that our destination was a one-horse town with nothing but a Sunoco and a shuttered Laundromat. One time, we landed in a speck of a town called Aynor, "Population 490," according to a rudimentary placard lodged near a stop sign. There wasn't anything in Aynor then: no diner to eat eggs in, not even a gas station where we could get a bag of chips. I was suddenly deflated by my mother's fallibility: she'd made a mistake in the place her finger chose, we were going to be hungry, this would not be fun. Then my mother nodded as if she had resolved something. "Four hundred ninety-two now!" she shouted at the sign. She revealed she'd stuffed the cooler full of potato chips and turkey sandwiches just in case, and we sat on a beach towel in front of the town sign to eat our picnic. My mother was like that: pragmatic so that she could be flexible. Those drives—ample, countless—were my mother showing me that distraction can be healing, that fun is medication, that you can drive away from anything that hurts.

I need one of those drives now: an escape from my own self. But my mind is so muddled with sleeplessness, I don't know where to go. I have tried alcohol and acting out and kissing other men. I have tried acupuncture and exercise, no exercise, essential oils, drugs made in a lab. I have tried denial. None of this makes me sleep, and without sleep, I have no boundaries: I am not a

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writer mother wife, I am a blob, struggling through the hours with eyes that will not close.

There are pastures on my way home from the therapist's white office. Though my horse life is thirty years behind me, my brain turns to equines. In my mind, I smell wet hay and touch dry muzzle, consider silver moss in the Beaufort County oak tree I was under when I had my final fall. In Irish folk custom, there is a Celtic goddess named Epona who reigns over fertility, horses, and the powers of the mind. Dressed in black, she appears at day-break bearing nightmares at a point where four roads cross. Her horse is always white. It makes sense, this color, I think, trying to keep my mind on the road and the turns that I must take. In ancient times, the movements of white horses were interpreted as auguries: if a horse crossed over a specific battle line with its left foot instead of its right one, if it neighed before or after the others in the cavalry, war was started or war was set aside—the rider of the neighing horse did, or didn't, charge.

A combination, perhaps, of superstition and reverence, white steeds influenced felicity, as well. During the Iron Age on the green hills now known as Uffington, prehistoric people dug trenches in the form of a running horse and filled them with white chalk. Visible from the heavens, the horse functioned as a kind of bat-signal, beseeching higher powers to cart the sun across the sky.

Driving home to a husband who will want to hear whether therapy is going to help me, to a daughter who will smell of milk and Goldfish crackers and whom it will take forty minutes to coerce into a bath, I think that I will take a white horse or a black one, anything that will help me face sundown with less dread.