THE RELATIONSHIP ISSUE

MY MOTHER HER LOVER AND ME

As a teenager, Adrienne Brodeur was asked to do the unthinkable – cover up her mother's affair and become an accomplice to her long-term infidelity. Now a parent herself, she looks back at how this life of lies affected her.
By Eleanor Steafel. Photography by Tony Luong

Document: 1016CC-DTMMM-1-250120-A016C-XX.pdf;Format:(205.00 x 260.00 mm);Date: 20.Jan 2020 16:42:41; Telegraph

This page: Adrienne Brodeur photographed at Cape Cod in December 2019. Opposite page, from top: Brodeur's mother, Malabar, as a young woman; a teenage Adrienne on the shoreline at Cape Cod

Document: 1017CC-DTMMM-1-250120-A017C-XX.pdf;Format:(205.00 x2 60.00 mm);Date: 20.Jan 2020 16:43:14; Telegraph

Adrienne Brodeur's childhood came to an abrupt end one sweltering summer's night on Cape Cod in 1980. She can still recall in immaculate detail the moments before everything changed. The cotton bed sheets, gritty with sand, scrunched around her damp body. Her hair, heavy with salt water, sticking to the back of her neck as she tossed and turned. And that feeling when, at midnight, her mother shook her from a fitful sleep and said five words that would set a new course for both of their lives: 'Ben Souther just kissed me.'

Ben Souther was her stepfather's closest friend. It must be one of the worst things you can do to a child, to force them to keep an adult's secret. At 14, Brodeur was recruited by her mother to help orchestrate what became an epic affair. Blossoming in the sudden light of her mother's attention (which until then had been sparse), the young Adrienne took up the position of chief confidante with relish. From that night on she became the keeper of her mother's secrets, gladly lying to her kind, partially disabled stepfather, Charles, and Souther's frail wife Lily, so that the lovers could spend time together.

'I promised immediately,' she writes in a memoir that has just been published, 40 years on from that summer, 'thrilled to have landed a starring role in my mother's drama.' The book caused a stir in the literary world, with a seven-figure bidding war between 15 publishing houses. The film rights were snapped up soon after, too: Kelly Fremon Craig, best known for directing *The Edge of Seventeen* with Hailee Steinfeld and Woody Harrelson, is set to direct.

The memoir chronicles the terrible destructive power of a lie, and its propensity to gnaw at a child's heart. The affair went on for 10 years, playing out clandestinely and in plain sight of both families during weekends on Cape Cod. Brodeur's mother, Malabar, a frustrated food writer, even came up with the idea for a cookbook, which was to be called *Wild Game*, on which the two couples would work together (Souther, an amateur hunter, regularly brought Malabar fish and game – all part of their lovers' code).

Brodeur was expected to help with the cover-up, chaperoning evening beach walks with her mother and Souther so the lovers could be together. 'I would take both their hands and tug them toward the door. Once the three of us were around the bend and out of the glow of the street lamp, my mother and Ben would kiss passionately, often with me still in the middle, part of a three-way embrace. We were in this love affair together.'

To cover for her mother's affair, Brodeur would be forced to come up with elaborate reasons for Malabar's absences, removing herself from the fun of a normal adolescence

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Left: now happily married, Brodeur has written a memoir. Below: on holiday with her mother in Hawaii, as a teenager

in order to stay home and look after her stepfather. As lying became a way of life, it ate away at her – physically, at first, in the form of anxiety-induced stomach pains – then later in life derailed her completely. A breakdown in her 20s brought her to her knees, and her marriage to Jack Souther – who was the son of her mother's lover (Freud might have had something to say about *that* arrangement) – came crashing down. It was another part of the fabric of lies that when she and Jack got together, he had no idea that his father was having an affair with his girlfriend's mother, let alone that she had helped orchestrate it.

As one of the many glowing reviews it has received rightly put it, Brodeur's *Wild Game* is a memoir that reads like a novel. Her writing is sumptuous and elegant, weaving the sounds and smells of the Cape through her memories. 'Cape Cod is a place where buried things surface and disappear again,' she writes. 'Wooden lobster pots, the vertebrae

'I knew only what pleased my mother; I didn't have a moral compass'

of humpback whales, chunks of frosted sea glass. For years and years my job was to pile on sand – fistfuls, shovelfuls, bucketfuls, whatever the moment necessitated – in an effort to keep my mother's secret buried.'

We meet at Brodeur's house in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she now lives with her husband Tim and their two children, Madeleine and William, two hours' drive north from the beach house of her childhood, where she still spends her summers, and where Malabar (now in her 80s and living with dementia) still resides. Before the book, Brodeur worked as an editor – in 1997, with Francis Ford Coppola, she founded the fiction magazine *Zoetrope: All-Story* – and most recently as executive director of a literary arts non-profit organisation.

It is a strange thing to emerge from someone's memoir and find yourself on their doorstep half an hour later. As Brodeur makes us tea in an orange Le Creuset pot – 'I hope it's OK, it's lapsang souchong, not everyone likes it' – my mind is still partly in her book. I can't help but think of Malabar, who made this same brew every morning, 'an elaborate ritual to clear the previous night's fog – brought on by cocktails, wine, a sleeping pill or two – and usher in the new day'. We cradle mugs steaming with that distinctive aroma and settle down to talk while flakes of snow fall outside.

When, I ask, did she know she needed to write her story? 'I feel like on some level I was always writing it,' she says. 'It is, really, my defining story. I didn't think I would write a book about it, but I was noodling around in the territory in all sorts of different ways.

'It's never going to be resolved; it's this murky grey area: I love my mother, but believe she really failed me, though also probably did as good a job as she could do, which is what most of us are trying to do.'

Now 53, catharsis for Brodeur has come in stages. First through the inevitable ending of a doomed, lonely marriage in which secrets were just as prevalent (Jack only discovered the affair when his mother Lily phoned him one day – his father had finally cracked and confessed all to his wife). Therapy, and starting to understand how she had gone 'so far down this wrong path' came next as she hauled herself out of a deep depression. Extricating herself from Malabar was crucial – the pair went a few years without seeing much of each other – and meant she could finally get to know herself. 'I knew only what pleased my mother,' she writes in the book. 'I didn't have a moral compass… Starting when I was 14, what made my mother happy was Ben Souther. With that, my lying took a dark turn.'

Once, for example, when her mother 'popped down to the basement to help Ben find something', Brodeur found herself doing anything she could think of to distract her stepfather and Ben's wife (who were regular supper guests) from the absurdly long time it was taking to locate a bag of charcoal. She found herself telling jokes and doing a jig, and then when her mother finally emerged, checking her for smeared lipstick or dishevelled clothing. 'Exactly where I told him it would be,' Malabar blithely announced.

It was becoming a mother herself, though, that heralded the biggest turning point. 'Having children is so revelatory,' she says. 'I realised that there was this legacy of secret-keeping in my family that didn't start with my mother, which went back generations. I just knew it needed to end with me. I think I can safely say that since my children were born I've known I wanted to write about it.'

Her daughter is now the exact age Brodeur was when her mother's affair began. 'It's been so helpful in my life, in my comprehension of what happened to me, to actually have a 14-year-old. Because of course, when

SOME NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED

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I remember myself at 14, [I think] of course I was ready for this. Now I can look back and realise I wasn't. But I felt that way. Especially in the beginning, I wanted my mother happy – I signed on, I was excited for her.

'I look at my daughter and she is her own person, but she's this girl who looks like a woman. All that happens at 14, which is sort of shocking to see. Sometimes she can behave like a woman, so composed and gracious. And then sometimes you just see her skipping and sticking her tongue out and being a child and you're like, "Ah, she's a child... I was a child."'

Wild Game takes its title from the book her mother never published, but also alludes to the many years of deception. After her stepfather's death in 1985, the affair was finally exposed, but rather than leave his wife for his lover, Souther stayed with Lily until her own death in 1992. Two months later, he moved in with Malabar and they were married within a year. They had 20 years together, travelling and eating their way around the world, before Souther died in 2013.

When Brodeur finally started writing five years ago, her journals and Malabar's recipes helped pull it all together. Brodeur was surprised by how clear her memories of that time were. It is the great criticism levelled at memoirists: how can you possibly remember who said what, what you were wearing, what you ate, when it was all so long ago? Food proved to be a mooring for her memories. 'With my mother, I actually do remember so many of the meals. I felt like I could only tell the story if I had meals to anchor me.'

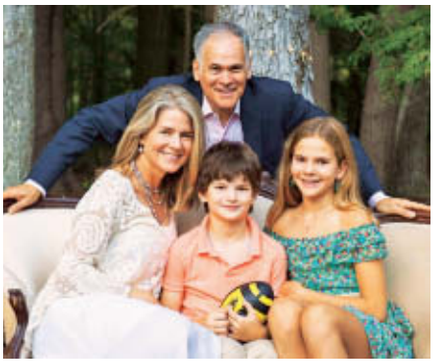
The book is filled with mouth-watering descriptions of food. Malabar had a nose-to-tail approach to cooking, which must have been ahead of her time. While America's mothers were still cooking meatloaf, lamb chops and Julia Child's quiche, Malabar roasted freshly shot squab and served it rare with creamy polenta, rolled fresh pasta for spaghetti vongole, and thought nothing of serving a pan of saffron-flecked bouillabaisse at a 1970s Cape Cod dinner party. 'The kitchen was command central,' Brodeur writes, 'and Malabar its five-star general.'

Interestingly, she is the only person in the book to have kept her real name – all the others were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Malabar was simply too striking a name to change. 'She is Malabar in her presence, she's not Mommy,' Brodeur says. Her love for her children was, she writes, 'conditional'. 'If I'd disappointed her in some way, had acted selfishly or broken an unspoken rule, she would stay silent, allowing me to feel the full weight of her abandonment.'

I wonder if she wasn't suffering from the same predicament as so many women of her generation – boredom. Would she have sought out such a dramatic personal life if she had been more satisfied, more stimulated, more intellectually fulfilled? 'I don't know, it's an interesting question because there was a lot of drama, and there was a lot of drama in her parents' lives, so it could also just have been acting out what was very familiar to her,' Brodeur ponders. 'She was the only child of these, as far as I can tell, really difficult parents who were married and divorced and remarried, and everyone is having an affair and discovering another sibling.

'And it was a different era for women. She should have been a business person; she would have been so successful. She wanted to be in her father's business and he just had no interest in bringing a girl into that.'

Malabar, of course, is now at a point in her life when memories fail her. But she knows about the book, and gave it her blessing. 'I certainly talk about it in front of her. Five years ago, when I was really serious about starting it, she was helpful, she gave me access to lots



Brodeur in 2017 with her husband, Tim, and children William and Madeleine, who are now 11 and 14

of her own journals, which are more food journals than anything else, and scrapbooks. I know she couldn't read a book right now.'

Brodeur sought approval from her father, her brother (who also didn't know about the affair at the time) and her ex-husband. 'I let them know and took their feelings into account. They have been great about it. It's gone as well as it could go.'

She also told her children. She is understandably wary of secrets, and adamant her own kids will never be asked to bear the weight of the adults' choices. But far from being bowled over by revelations about their family history, her children were unperturbed. 'There was a point last summer where I came out of my bedroom and I saw my daughter reading a galley. And then she didn't finish it. And I wondered, was that because it was hard for her to read? Or is it because she's not obsessed with her mother's interior life like I was and she's a busy 14-year-old? Either way, I thought, this is only good.

'I don't feel worried about my kids having secrets, because I sort of feel that's a normal part of growing up. But I do fear secrets generally.' A consequence, surely, of having spent so long covering up her mother's. 'It does occur to me that I am not someone who is raring to take a DNA test.'

The book has been out since October in the United States, meaning Brodeur has now sat in countless chairs all over the country spilling her soul to audiences and journalists. Does she finally feel a sense of finality or catharsis? 'I don't think there is a full stop to anything. I certainly know that I will not be keeping secrets, I'm not worried about that. But I think there is this desire to say it's over, this is the end.'

As for that elusive apology, she has made peace with all that and no longer longs for her mother to say she's sorry. 'I think I always wanted to just have the moment where [she would say], "I was wrong, I'm sorry," the big moment. We're at such a different place in our relationship, because now I'm legitimately in the mother role that I was always in, in some ways, but now she can't do anything for herself. I guess I have let a lot of it go.'

It is enough, she says, to have written it. 'I do think, not that I was silenced, but I wasn't allowed to tell my story. It's interesting to me that I'm in my 50s by the time I'm doing this. How has it taken me so long to find my voice?'

Before we spoke, I expected Brodeur to have a kind of armour up, given what she has been through. But the woman I meet has an impressively Pollyannaish perspective on life. 'My mother in so many ways had such a grand and beautiful life. She travelled, she was wealthy, she married interesting men. She has two children, two grandchildren. And yet, she was always glass-half-empty. She experienced the world in this very lonely way.

'I don't know if [it's] DNA or hard work and therapy – and I've done all of it – or just some aspect of luck, but I don't experience the world that way. I don't want a whole lot more.'

At the end of the book, she writes about wanting to ask her daughter if she's getting this motherhood thing right. The answer came not long ago when Madeleine was perplexed by an English assignment. 'She was tasked with writing an essay about a personal challenge she'd had to overcome herself, a time when adults in her life were unavailable. "I don't get this," she said, apparently mystified at the thought of parents being absent or unsupportive. "Mom, what would you write if you were me?"' It sounds as if Brodeur's hope that her family's legacy of secret-keeping would end with her has come true. Madeleine might not have enough fodder for a memoir, but what an achievement that would be.

Wild Game (Vintage, £16.99) is out now

Document: 1021CC-DTMMM-1-250120-A021C-XX.pdf;Format: (205.00 x 260.00 mm);Date: 20.Jan 2020 16:43:14; Telegraph