

‘Are we there, Daddy? Are we there?’

Jenny’s cry from the open back seat. Paul turned around to her shining eyes and fine black hair streaming in the wind. The sky behind her was an aching blue broken by a brisk succession of clouds. An island sky, like home. She reached forward and grabbed his ears.

‘Daddy!’

‘No yet darling, but soon.’

Despite the cold, she was just loving this and little Simon too, gurgling away excitedly in sympathy. He and the children finally out of drab dreary London and into the fabled countryside, even if viewed from a four-lane highway. A wild goose chase probably, almost certainly, but something, at least, to occupy their Saturday.

Paul was in front with Nigel, driving them with such carefree and exhilarating panache. Forty plus, maybe fifty, but handling this classic bottle-green Astor Martin sports like a young blade who had borrowed it from his father. He was grinning like a maniac.

‘My wife thought it needed a run!’

His wife, Sally, a work colleague of Paul’s wife, Susan, was giggling in the back seat between Paul’s children. Now she was tickling them. Hopefully Jenny wouldn’t pee on the leather.

‘Are we there, Daddy?’

‘Soon darling.’

‘Bit of serendipity,’ said Nigel, ‘meeting an art conservator. When Susan mentioned you to Sally, I thought at once of Ken Brownlee. He’s been talking on and off about having that painting valued for ages.’

‘It’s a nice little trip for us.’

Paul looked around at the hedgerows and green green fields, all marching past at a slightly giddy pace.

So, Nigel, how long have you been working as a horse vet?’

‘Just since I came to England. Before that a general vet. Sally’s part of a whole horsey crowd, introduced me around. This particular animal,’ one hand on the wheel, the other miming airily, ‘cut its leg some while back, requiring multiple visits. I’m expecting, hoping, this time to take the final bandage off.’

He sounded like a man who relished his job.

‘You are enjoying living and working here.’

‘Working, yes, to be honest, living, not so much. England, for various reasons, doesn’t really suit me. As a matter of fact I considered immigrating to Australia. Still might. Sally quite

likes the idea. She gets on well with your wife. I understand you two are coming to this dinner thingamee tonight.'

'That's right.'

'Good, we can catch up a bit more.'

They drove for a while in silence, the wind whistling past. Nigel seemed to be mulling over something.

'Tell me Paul, would there be much in the way of work in your particular neck of the woods?'

'Tasmania? High unemployment, generally speaking. But for a doctor of horses and a doctor of children? Sure.'

Nigel Goldman. A chubby pocked complexion that had seen some sun and drink, and a thinning head of dark curly hair with flecks of grey and a short curly beard with more flecks of grey. Belly over belt, he looked like the academic Paul once imagined himself being. A comfortable rumped figure, actually more like a teddy-bear than an academic, but a big burly teddy-bear. Also looked like he'd known a few ups and downs. Something in the eyes, or perhaps around the eyes. How subtle the human face is. Rembrandt.

They took a sudden exit from the highway and pulled up with a screech of brakes in front of a demure rural setting.

'Kids, we're *there!*'

Both scrambled wildly from the car.

The farm homestead was right out of the picture books Paul read to Jenny: single-storeyed, a steeply pitched tiled roof that had probably once been thatched, supported by thick walls of stone. Two cute dormer windows, all other windows deeply inset and mullioned, ivy climbing to the chimney, and a bare front garden through which a few early spring shoots were beginning to peep.

Nigel's knock on the door brought out the dogs which bustled feverishly around the visitors, snouts in groins, paws on jumpers. Paul looked to the safety of Jenny and Simon who were the same size as the animals—Simon was actually smaller—but they were hysterical with glee at the attentions. Mrs Brownlee, Maude, stepped forward and introduced herself. Sally took both children's hands.

'I'll take these two for a walk while you lot do your business.'

Off they went with the dogs, squealing merrily.

Maude led Paul and Nigel down a hallway into the kitchen at the back. Maude Brownlee appeared to Paul to be the most exhausted individual he had ever met, no flesh, huge dark rings

under her eyes, but for someone apparently mortally ill she displayed terrific energy, racing around her country kitchen whipping up biscuits and tea for her guests. The Aga sat impassive, as did Ken Brownlee, a man of few words, no words really, gruff and fiftyish, solid and bearded, firm handshakes all around. The still eye of his wife's storm. Maude made the conversation.

‘Nigel has told you us about you, Mr. Collins.’

‘Paul, please.’

‘We were left with a few paintings from Ken's brother. He collected all types of things. Loved to browse the antique markets. We never thought any of it worth much. I'd say he would have known.’

‘The one in the stables Nigel mentioned, it has an Australian provenance.’

‘Framed in Macquarie St. Hobart Town, Lyell and Rogers, 1831,’ said Maude.

She'd gone and looked at it after Nigel had told them about him.

‘The label on the back is worn but clear,’ she continued. ‘Do you know these framers?’

‘Yes. They did a lot of work.’

‘Good luck, you being here.’

‘Thanks. I hope I can help.’

‘Well if an expert in the field can't, I don't know who can.’

‘We'll see, Mrs. Brownlee.’

‘Maude, please.’

They attended to their tea and biscuits, then Ken Brownlee gave a nod and all three men rose in accord and walked out into the fresh air and across to the stables, an oversized antique barn. They passed through a door set in a much larger door into bright shadow.

It took Paul's senses a few moments to adjust. Mingled scents of leather, hay, beast and manure, although Paul had never minded horse-shit which he thought smelt slightly sweet. All that grass. A floor of damp uneven flags while high above spears of light pierced the roof shingles and the big gloomy crossbeams brought to mind the gothic fantasies of Pirandello. The horses in their stalls were alert to their entry, snorting and shuffling within their confines. Some kicked the boards.

The injured animal Nigel needed to see was a glossy chestnut with an uneven white blaze on its forehead, a huge mare. Paul had no idea what her particular use would be. Nigel carefully removed the bandage from the lower part of the left back leg, the fetlock, he explained, which looked to Paul like the horse's ankle but which Nigel further explained was more like the ball of the foot on humans.

‘Looking good, Ken. Want to give her a trot?’

Ken slipped on a bridle and led the horse back out into the open. It looked a little startled, sniffing the air. He clipped the bridle to a lead rope, and with Nigel, watched it walk around in a large loose circle. Apparently satisfied, he led it back into its stall. Then he turned to Paul.

‘Now, about this painting.’

He led them over to a rickety ladder which they each ascended into a loft stretching the width of the building. Suddenly Paul had an intimation. He realised this was groundless, of course, probably just a sense of exhilaration from the wide beauty of the space. Open to the elements, at either end round window cavities looked across intensely verdant meadow upon meadow. Pure English pastoral, may as well be an artwork, too vivid and glorious to be cliché, Constable and co. He started poking around. Heaps of junk.

‘Is this it?’

Trying not to sound disappointed, but then why expect anything? He picked up a sizeable canvas and held it out at arms’ length. Bog-standard nineteenth-century still life, bunches of grapes, piled pears, a silver goblet, a sturgeon, *la nature morte*, as the French so rightly put it. Did Farmer Brownlee really think this was worth putting him out for?

‘No, not that one, lad, over here.’

Ken Brownlee approached a pile of dusty rubbish, pulled a flashlight from his pocket, and directed its beam towards a large Hessian covered oblong. Very large. The size alone was unusual. This was no domestic piece. The farmer flung back the cover and illuminated the dim canvas. A few swampy silhouettes. Too much grime to make anything out.

‘Ken, if you and Nigel can just hold it up a bit, I’d like to look at the back.’

The men levered it and Paul crawled around behind with the flashlight. In the bottom left-hand corner was the faded framer’s label Maude Brownlee had quoted. Paul focussed the beam on this and an electric jolt shot through him. Under the framer’s brand was printed clearly: Artist, Edwin Forster. Forster! Could it be possible?

He returned to the front, plying the light continuously over the surface. Nothing was clear. Nevertheless.

Paul knew that, physiologically, one’s eyes only ever see a restricted patch of the real world at any moment, they dart around like a hyperactive bee before a bank of blossoms, but far more quickly, so the mind can make the apprehensive connections. It is the mind that sees the whole, really sees what one sees. Even so, his apprehension here seemed almost

instantaneous, as though the image had always been somewhere in the back of his mind and was now simply seeking confirmation.

Or was he just fooling himself?

‘Quite of bit of dirt, lad. Any idea what it might be?’

What it might be? Yes! He had a very good idea what it might be.