



magnus

mills

the restraint
of beasts

'Very, very good.'
Independent

The Restraint of Beasts

1998, EN

The news couldn't be worse for Tam, Richie and their new supervisor: Mr McCrindle's fence has gone slack. The three of them are duly dispatched to the McCrindle farm, where they finish off the work, then go to England where, after rain-sodden days bashing in fence posts, they wolf down baked beans in their shared caravan and spend their evenings and cash in the local pub. But then they encounter the Hall Brothers – butchers, rival fencers and local heroes...

One

“I’m putting you in charge of Tam and Richie,” said Donald. “They can’t go to England on their own.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“We’d never know what they were getting up to.”

“No.”

“So you can take over as foreman from today.”

“Right.”

He allowed me a few moments to absorb the news, then asked, “Are you finding it hot in here?”

“Just a little, yes,” I replied.

“You should have said.” Donald rose from behind his desk and moved to the skirting board where a radiator pipe emerged. He turned a stop-tap several times, clockwise, before settling again in his chair.

“These things can be controlled,” he remarked. “Now, are there any questions?”

He sat back and waited. I knew the sort of questions Donald expected me to ask, but I couldn’t think of any. Not with him examining me from behind his desk the way he did. At the moment only one obvious question came to mind.

“Why me?”

“There’s no one else available. You’re the last one.”

“Oh...right.”

Donald’s gaze remained fixed on me.

“You don’t seem very excited about all this,” he said.

“No, no,” I replied. “Really, I am.”

“Doesn’t sound like it. After all, it’s not often we appoint a new foreman.”

“No, I know,” I said. “I just wondered...have you told them?”

“Robert has told them.”

“Robert?”

“Yes.”

“Can’t you tell them?”

“Robert is quite capable of telling them.” He reached for his typewriter and slid it across the desk towards him. I watched as he placed a sheet of paper in the roller and began tapping the keys. After a while he looked up and saw that I was still standing there.

“Yes?”

“Wouldn’t it be better coming from you?” I asked.

“Why’s that?”

“It would give me some authority.”

“Haven’t you any authority of your own?”

“Yes, but...”

“Well, then.” Donald continued looking at me for a long while. “It’s only for a few weeks,” he said. “Then you can come back.”

He began attending to his typewriter again, so I went out. Donald’s mind was obviously made up, therefore further discussion was pointless. Closing the door behind me I paused briefly and listened. Inside the office an unsteady tapping had started up. The decision was probably being committed to paper at this very moment, so that was that. It would have been better if Donald had told them himself, but I really wasn’t bothered either way. There was no big deal about the new arrangement. No particular cause for concern. After all, there were only two of them. Should be a piece of cake. True, they had their own way of doing certain things, but that was fair enough. Only to be expected considering how long they’d been together. We’d just have to get used to each other, that’s all. I decided to go and see them straight away.

Their pick-up truck was parked at the other side of the yard. They’d been sitting in the cab earlier when I went past on my way to Donald’s office. Now, however, there was no sign of them. I walked over and glanced at the jumble of tools and equipment lying in the back of the vehicle. Everything looked as though it had been thrown in there in a great hurry. Clearly it would all need sorting out before we could do anything, so I got in the truck and reversed round to the store room. Then I sat and waited for them to appear. Looking around the inside of the cab I noticed the words ‘Tam’ and ‘Rich’ scratched on the dashboard. A plastic lunch box and a bottle of Irn-Bru lay on the shelf.

So where were they? They seemed to have disappeared without trace. From what I’d heard this was the sort of thing they did all the time. They’d just go off somewhere for no apparent reason. And when they came back they wouldn’t have an excuse or anything. That’s what I’d heard anyway.

Eventually I got fed up with waiting and went round to the timber yard. They were nowhere to be seen, so I then conducted a search of all the store rooms and outhouses. Nothing.

Finally, when I couldn’t think of anywhere else to look, I went back to where I’d started and found them sitting in the truck eating sandwiches. They sat side by side in the double passenger seat, watching me as I approached. I knew Richie by sight. He was the one by the window. Therefore the other one must be Tam.

I spoke through the opening. “Alright?”

“Alright,” said Richie.

“Just got back?”

“Last night.”

“Looks like we’ll need a bit of a sort out,” I said, indicating the gear in the back of the truck. “But finish your sandwiches first.”

I walked round and got in the cab at the driver’s side. Tam looked at me for a moment as I slammed the door shut, but remained silent. I could now see that Richie was providing the sandwiches from the plastic lunch box, perched on his lap. He swigged the Irn-Bru and handed it to Tam.

“Don’t leave any floaters in it,” he said.

Tam drank, lowered the bottle, and examined the contents.

Then he turned to me. “Like some?”

“Oh. Thanks.” I took the bottle and drank the warm dregs in the bottom. “Thanks,” I repeated, handing it back.

“That’s OK.” Tam passed the empty bottle back to Richie, who screwed the top back on before throwing it out of the window.

And so we sat there in silence. Richie on one side, Tam in the middle and me behind the

steering wheel. All staring through the windscreen. It was a bleak sort of day, with occasional gusts of wind gently rocking the vehicle from side to side.

There was a movement in the distance and Robert came into sight. We watched as he opened a gate to let Ralph through. He appeared to be about to set off on one of his long walks. Whether or not he noticed us sitting there in the truck, watching him, was hard to tell. If he did, he didn't show it. He merely closed the gate behind him and ambled away over the fields.

"Look at Robert," said Richie. That was all he said, but I could tell by the stifled silence which followed the remark that Tam and Richie were obviously sharing some private joke made at Robert's expense. I didn't join in.

After a short interval I said, "Did Robert come and speak to you?"

"Just now," replied Richie.

"Oh. Right. Is that OK with you then?"

"Have to be, won't it?"

"Suppose so," I said.

Tam glanced at me briefly, but didn't seem to have anything to say on the subject. Instead he turned to Richie. "Got a fag, Rich?"

Richie reached to a lump I'd noticed in his shirt pocket and took out a cigarette pack. Then he squirmed sideways and fished a lighter from his jeans. He handed Tam a cigarette, gave him a light, lit his own, and we sat there in silence for another few minutes while they smoked, and desultory flecks of rain landed on the cab roof.

"Right," I said when they'd finished. "We'd better have a go at sorting out all the gear." We got out and stood looking into the back of the truck. The collection of tools lay in a shallow pool of rainwater, some of them bent, most of them showing the first signs of rust. This was supposed to be a set of professional fence-building equipment, but actually looked like a hoard of junk. There were hole-digging implements, wire-tightening gear, a rusty steel spike (blunt), a selection of chisels and a chain winch. All in various states of disrepair. Also several coils of wire. The only item that appeared to be in reasonable condition was a large post-hammer with a cast iron head, lying slightly to one side.

"Here's Donald," murmured Tam, and they both immediately began sorting through the pile. Donald had emerged from his office and was advancing across the yard in our direction. His sudden appearance had a marked effect on Tam and Richie, whose faces showed that they were concentrating hard on their work. Tam leaned over the side of the truck and pulled out the post-hammer.

"Glad to see it's still in one piece," said Donald as he joined us. He took the hammer from Tam and stood it, head downwards, on the concrete. Richie, meanwhile, had lifted one of the coils of wire onto his shoulder and was about to take it into the store room.

"You seem to be in a great hurry all of a sudden," said Donald.

This caused Richie to hesitate awkwardly in mid-step with the coil balanced on his shoulder. He half-turned and looked at Tam. Donald was now peering into the back of the truck.

"You people really should take more care of your equipment," he said.

After a dutiful pause Richie made another move towards the store room but was again brought to a halt by Donald.

"Leave that for now. I've just had a serious phone call. You'd better come into the office." Without further comment he turned and walked off towards the open door. We all glanced at each other, saying nothing, and filed after him.

On entering the office I saw that Donald had placed two hard chairs side by side facing his

desk. I'd seen these hard chairs before. They were slightly less than full adult size, made from wood, and spent most of the time stacked one on top of the other in the corner beside the filing cabinet. That was where they'd been earlier when I was talking to Donald. I'd hardly noticed them really. They just looked as though they were intended to remain there indefinitely. It never occurred to me that these two hard chairs were kept for a particular purpose. They had been positioned squarely and symmetrically in front of the desk, and Tam and Richie did not have to be told where to sit.

I went and stood by the small recessed window, half-leaning against the radiator, which I noticed had been turned up full again. There was one other change. Donald had removed the light-shade from the ceiling and replaced the usual hundred-watt bulb with a more powerful one. This bathed every corner of the office in sharp light.

Slowly and deliberately he settled in his chair and sat for a few moments regarding Tam and Richie across the desk.

"Mr McCrindle's fence has gone slack," he announced at last.

Two

Donald let the words sink in. “He’s just been on the phone. He’s very disappointed. You’ll have to go back today and put it right. I thought you knew what you were doing.”

He paused. Tam and Richie said nothing.

“I thought you knew what you were doing. You’re supposed to be specialists. Mr McCrindle wanted a high-tensile fence, not something to play a game of tennis over. How are you going to progress with future projects if this kind of thing is going to happen all the time? You only finished off Mr McCrindle yesterday.”

I noticed that Tam and Richie looked quite meek while they were being addressed by Donald. They sat in their two hard chairs, which were a little too small for them, avoiding his gaze and staring with interest at his typewriter, or maybe the pencil lying next to it.

“It means you won’t be able to go to England until the middle of next week,” Donald continued. “Convenient for you, isn’t it?”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by this remark.

“Sorry,” mumbled Tam at last.

Richie mumbled ‘Sorry’ too.

There was more. “I’ve just had a look in the file. It seems you didn’t measure the fence.”

Tam looked up briefly. “Oh,” he said. “No.”

“How am I supposed to invoice Mr McCrindle if you failed to take a measurement?”

“Don’t know.” Tam shuffled his feet slightly. The radiator pipe under the office floor was slowly warming up his rubber boots, so that they stuck momentarily to the lino. Both Tam and Richie were now beginning to look very uncomfortable. Their chairs were so close together that they were pressed against one another, shoulder to shoulder, each in danger of being unbalanced at any moment.

“Why didn’t you measure Mr McCrindle’s fence?”

“Forgot.”

“Oh, you forgot. It would be a different story if I forgot to pay you, wouldn’t it?”

Donald fell silent and sat looking at them, apparently waiting for an answer.

It was Richie who managed to speak this time. “Suppose so,” he said.

How long Donald kept them sitting there, side by side in those two hard chairs, was difficult to say. I noticed for the first time that there was no clock in that room. Nor was there a calendar on the wall. Even the limited daylight coming through the small recessed window was defeated by the glare of the light-bulb, further isolating the office interior from the world outside. And as long as they offered no excuse or reason for what they failed to do, Tam and Richie would have to remain under Donald’s relentless gaze. This was their punishment.

Several minutes seemed to pass before it was over. Eventually Donald leaned back in his chair and shook his head slowly.

“What are we going to do with you?” he said. They did not even try to answer.

After Tam and Richie had been dismissed, Donald turned to me.

“You’ll have to go with them to put Mr McCrindle right. Not a very good start, is it?”

“Not really,” I said. He appeared to be implying that I had played some part in the slackness of Mr McCrindle’s fence, a sort of guilt by association, even though I’d only met Tam and Richie about ten minutes earlier.

“While you’re there can you also make sure the fence is straight,” Donald added. I had been wondering when he would bring up the question of straightness. Donald was known to have an obsession about it. He could often be seen glancing along a line of posts during the construction process, making sure the alignment was true. Obviously it was better for a fence to be straight, if only for the sake of appearance, but Donald wanted perfection. As Mr McCrindle had demonstrated by his phone call, the main concern of farmers was that their fences should be tight. Without this the restraint of beasts was impossible. We were rushing back to deal with Mr McCrindle’s fence because it had gone slack, and for that reason only. I doubt if he had even looked to see if it was straight or not despite Donald’s concern. It most probably was straight, but if for some reason it wasn’t, well then what was I supposed to do? Take out all the posts and start again? Donald’s pursuit of perfection seemed to be taking things too far. The way he went on anyone would think we were engaged in an exact science. After all, we were only fencing contractors. The process was straightforward.

You put posts in the ground, you stretched wires between them, and then you moved on. That’s what we’d done in the last gang I was in. It was repetitive work, but to tell the truth the whole operation was so simple we hadn’t even needed a foreman. We just got on with it. And when the fence was finished it was invariably straight, more or less.

Of course, Tam and Richie hadn’t helped matters by building a fence that went slack. Apparently they’d been working away at Mr McCrindle’s for several days before suddenly returning the previous evening claiming the job was now complete. Donald had estimated the contract would take a week, but they’d come back a day early. The phone call this morning had merely confirmed his belief that they needed closer supervision.

“One more thing,” he added. “There’ll be no need for Richie to drive the truck any more.”

“Why’s that then?” I asked.

“It’s part of a new policy I’ve formulated to reduce our insurance costs. Only foremen will drive company vehicles from now on. Richie is banned.”

“Have you told him?”

“Robert has told him,” he replied.

“What about Tam?”

“He’s banned by the Constabulary.”

Now that Donald was giving me his full attention, I found myself looking at the top of his desk most of the time, rather than directly at him. He had this way of staring at people for moments on end without blinking, and it was most disconcerting. Even Tam and Richie could be easily reduced under his gaze. When they were out in the fields they looked like wild men, head-bangers with long Viking hair. If it weren’t for their rubber Wellington boots they’d appear quite menacing. Yet it only took a prolonged stare from Donald to render them meek and mild. During their interrogation about Mr McCrindle’s fence they’d both spent most of the time gazing at Donald’s typewriter, and now I was doing the same thing. I noticed the sheet of paper in the roller, and upside down I could see three names printed under the heading ‘N°3 Gang’. One of them was mine. As I tried to read the other two names I realized that Donald had stopped talking.

“Banned by the Constabulary?” I repeated.

I thought I caught the first twinkle of a joke coming here, so I grinned and said, “Oh, yes. Ha.”

Donald just continued gazing at me, so I went outside.

— I found Tam and Richie sitting in the truck again, side by side in the double passenger seat with their arms folded. The pile of equipment didn't look as if it had been touched.

"Right," I said. "Do you want to finish sorting this lot out?"

"Not particularly," Richie replied.

I tried a different approach. "OK. We'll sort this lot out and then go to Mr McCrindle's."

"What time are we having our break?" he asked.

"You've just had it," I replied.

"When?"

"When you had your sandwiches."

"Oh."

"Well, can we have a fag first?" said Tam.

"I suppose so," I said.

"Like one?"

"Oh. Er...no thanks. Thanks anyway."

So we sat in the truck for another few minutes while they smoked two more of Richie's cigarettes.

"Donald got a bit heavy, didn't he?" I remarked after a while.

"Fucking right," said Richie.

There was a brief silence, then Tam spoke. "I fucking hate it when he calls us into the office."

I nodded.

"So what was this Mr McCrindle like then?" I asked.

"He kept sneaking up on us," replied Tam.

"Did he?"

"Asking questions about the fence all the time. We could never get rid of him."

"Maybe he found it interesting," I suggested.

"Huh," said Tam.

"I thought he was alright," said Richie. "He made us a cup of tea one day."

"Fucking big deal!" snapped Tam. "He was always interfering. What about when he was watching us behind that tree?"

"Oh," said Richie. "I forgot about that."

"What was that then?" I asked.

"He was spying on us," said Tam.

"Was he?"

"Then he comes along. 'How's it going, boys?'"

"Perhaps he was just trying to be friendly," I said.

"Too fucking friendly," said Tam.

They finished smoking.

"So why do you think his fence has gone slack?" I asked.

Tam looked at me. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well," I said. "Why do you think it has? I'm just asking, that's all. So we know what tool we'll need."

"Must be something wrong with the wire," he said.

"Donald seems to think it's faulty workmanship."

“He would.”

“But you’re saying it isn’t.”

“I’ve just told you it’s the wire.”

“So you don’t think a post could have come loose then?”

Tam hardened his look. “Our posts never come loose,” he announced.

“Here’s Robert,” said Richie.

Ralph had just appeared from round the corner of the outbuildings, which meant that Robert wasn’t far behind. A moment later he came into sight. Without a word from me, Tam and Richie both got out of the truck and disappeared into the store room.

When they were gone Robert came and spoke to me. I noticed he was carrying Richie’s Irn Bru bottle in his hand.

“I had a word with them,” he said.

“Yes...er...thanks,” I replied.

He studied the label on the bottle. “So they’re being alright, are they?”

“Yes, yes,” I said. “Fine.”

“No problems?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certain.”

“Good. We like all our gangs to be balanced.”

He nodded and smiled at Tam and Richie as they emerged again. Then he wandered off, still carrying the empty bottle, followed by Ralph. I watched as they crossed the yard and entered an office adjoining, but separate from, Donald’s.

I felt a bit sorry for Robert because he didn’t really have enough to do. Ever since Donald had taken over the management of the company, Robert’s role had been gradually whittled away. That was why he spent so much time going for walks. These consisted of a vague meander across the fields surrounding the company premises, along a route apparently chosen by Ralph. Afterwards they would come back and Robert would sit in his office again. Nobody was sure what he did in there. He didn’t even have a telephone these days. Donald ran the company more or less on his own, setting up contracts, dispatching gangs and so forth. This was done with the utmost efficiency. No more than one gang was allowed ‘home’ at any one time, to the extent that I’d hardly ever actually set eyes on any other employees. I had no idea where Nos. 1 and 2 gangs were working or when they were expected to return. The company premises, as a result, always seemed quiet. Donald controlled everything and Robert was only kept on hand to perform the occasional duty. His task today, for example, had been to tell Tam and Richie they would shortly be going to England with their new foreman. Whereas Donald chose to impart the news himself that Mr McCrindle’s fence had gone slack.



Mr McCrindle had a sloping field. A sloping field! As if a farmer didn’t have enough to worry about. It was the curse of his life: always had been. Not only was there a terrible problem with surface water during the winter months, but now all the government drainage grants were beginning to dry up. Worst of all, the bottom part of the field was so steep it was no use to him because his cows wouldn’t go down there. And if they did they wouldn’t come back!

Mr McCrindle told us all this as we stood at the top of the field wishing he would go away. Tam and Richie had heard it all before, of course, and now they kept slightly aloof, leaving me to deal

with him.

“Sounds like you’d be better off with sheep,” I remarked.

Mr McCrindle looked at me. “Sheep?”

“Yes,” I said. “With it being sloping, like. They might prefer it.”

“I’m a dairy farmer,” he said. “What would I want with sheep?”

“Er...don’t know. Just a suggestion, really.”

The difficulty with talking to Mr McCrindle was that he had very watery eyes which made him look as though he was going to burst into tears at any moment. You felt you had to be very careful what you said to him. I’d only mentioned sheep in a half-hearted attempt to change the subject of conversation. Up until then we’d been talking about Mr McCrindle’s new fence, and he’d made it quite clear just how disappointed he was.

“I’m very disappointed, boys,” he kept saying, with a glance at Tam and Richie. “Very disappointed indeed.”

He’d been onto us ever since the moment we arrived. No sooner had we got out of the truck to survey the situation, than he had come chugging into the field in his van. I would have preferred to have a chance to work out what had gone wrong before he turned up. Maybe have a walk down the fence line to consider our position and prepare ourselves for awkward questions. But, in the event, he was on the scene straight away, so there was nothing I could do.

“It’s a very sorry state of affairs,” he said, the tears welling up in his eyes.

Mr McCrindle had every right to be disappointed. He had particularly specified a high-tensile fence, even though it was much more expensive than a conventional one. That was why he had contacted the company in the first place. It specialized in high-tensile fencing and had been a pioneer in developing the technique to its present state. Only best-quality galvanized spring-steel wire and weather-resistant posts were used, every fence being erected by highly experienced personnel. He knew this because it was all outlined in the illustrated company brochure (written by Donald).

Mr McCrindle now surprised me by producing a copy from his inside pocket.

“It says here,” he said, reading aloud. “‘A high-tensile fence should retain its tension for the first five years at least’.”

He poked his finger at the line of print. “See? Five years. Cost me a fortune and it went slack overnight!”

We looked across at the evidence, a line of brand new posts marching off down one side of the field, with all the wires hanging limp.

“No use to man nor beast!” he announced.

Poor Mr McCrindle. I thought he was going to break down in front of me. All he wanted to do was get his cows turned into the field, but he couldn’t. Of course he was disappointed! He was a livestock farmer whose new fence had gone slack, and I wanted to put my arm around his shoulder and say, “There there.”

“Let’s see what the problem is then,” I said, striding towards the fence. As I approached I remembered Donald’s injunction about checking that it was straight. To do so it was necessary to perform a sort of genuflection at one end of the fence and glance along the line of posts. I was just doing this when I became aware that Mr McCrindle had followed me and was looking puzzled.

“What are you doing?” he asked, as I stood upright again.

“Nothing really,” I replied. “Just making sure it’s straight.”

Behind Mr McCrindle I noticed Tam and Richie exchanging glances.

“What’s that got to do with the price of tea in China?” he asked.

“Well...I just thought I’d look, that’s all.”

“And is it?”

“Take a look for yourself.”

Mr McCrindle stood at the end of the fence and genuflected with a grunt. “Oh, me bloody back!” He shut one eye, then the other. “What am I supposed to be lining it up with?”

“Itself.”

I left Mr McCrindle squinting along the line of posts and set off down the fence to see if I could find the fault. Realizing that they were now alone with him, Tam and Richie quickly followed after me.

I inspected every post as I went, to make sure each one was firmly embedded in the ground. They all were. I examined the condition of the wire. It was shining and new, straight from the factory. All the time I was aware of Tam and Richie watching me, watching the tests I carried out on their fence. Eventually we got down to the other end.

“See?” said Tam.

“What?” I said.

“You said a post must be loose.”

“No I didn’t. I just wondered why the fence had gone slack, that’s all.”

Tam looked at me but said nothing.

“So why has it then?” I asked.

“Mr McCrindle shouldn’t have kept interfering.”

“Yeah, alright, but that’s no reason...”

“Well I don’t fucking know!” he snapped. “I’m not fucking foreman, am I?”

“What difference does that make?” I said, but Tam had already turned and gone stomping off up the field.

I looked at Richie. “Now what?”

“Tam used to be foreman.”

“When?”

“Until you came along.”

“What, today?”

He nodded.

“I didn’t know that,” I said. “Who was he foreman of?”

“Me.”

“I thought you were both equal.”

“He’s been a fencer longer than me...or you,” he said.

I sighed. “It’s not my fault. This was Donald’s idea.”

“Oh.” Richie was now idly toying with a fence wire.

“By the way,” I said. “Why do you think it’s gone slack?”

“Mr McCrindle kept interfering,” he replied.

Well, maybe, but it looked to me as if the wires simply hadn’t been tightened up properly in the first place. The fence bore all the hallmarks of a job that had been rushed in the final stages, and in a way Mr McCrindle probably could be held to blame. Tam had complained earlier about how he was forever sneaking up on them and poking about while they were building the fence. I came to the conclusion that Tam and Richie had simply failed to tighten the wires properly because of their haste to escape the attentions of Mr McCrindle. It was no excuse, but, nevertheless, it was probably the reason.

“Is that what you want me to tell Donald then?” I asked.

“Dunno,” said Richie.

Well I knew, and I could just imagine what Donald would say. After all, the company was hardly going to make a profit on a job that had gone wrong like this. Tam seemed to have conveniently forgotten that it would be me, not him, who would have to report back to Donald. It was me who had to take responsibility for restoring the tension in Mr McCrindle’s fence. I could see already that we were going to have to come back again the next day. It had taken so long to get all Tam and Richie’s equipment sorted out and straightened up, before driving out to Mr McCrindle’s, that the light had already started to fade by the time we got there. At this time of the year the darkness crept up on you so slowly you barely noticed, and it was far too late to start tightening wires now. Which meant we’d have to return tomorrow. All highly inefficient. It wasn’t really a job for three men over two days, yet what could I do? I could hardly send Tam and Richie back here unsupervised tomorrow, especially not with Mr McCrindle lurking around. And it seemed unthinkable to split them up and just bring Tam. Or just Richie. As far as I knew that had never been done. Fortunately, Donald seemed to have washed his hands of the Mr McCrindle episode and wanted nothing more to do with it.

As long as I got it sorted out ‘before the beginning of next week’ he would not intervene. Hopefully, by the time the question of profit and loss came up, Mr McCrindle would be a forgotten name in the accounts.

We found Tam brooding about halfway up the fence. There didn’t seem to be any sign of Mr McCrindle anywhere, and we decided he must have cleared off for the time being. So at least we had some respite.

“Got a fag, Rich?” said Tam, as we approached. Richie reached for the lump in his shirt pocket and produced his pack of cigarettes, then fished the lighter out of his jeans. As they lit up I wondered with irritation why he didn’t keep them together in the same pocket.

Tam turned to me. “We’ll have to come back tomorrow, will we?”

“Looks like it.”

“That’s a cunt, isn’t it?”

Yes, I agreed, it was. Dusk was now approaching quickly. I left them smoking and went and stood looking down the steep part of the field into the gloom.

To my dismay I saw Robert coming up the other way. What was he doing there? I turned to warn Tam and Richie, whom I could just see in the fading light. I got their attention, put my finger to my lips, and beckoned them to join me quietly.

“He’s come to snoop on us,” murmured Tam.

We could now see that Robert had Ralph with him. It was interesting to watch their progress up the slope. Instead of scrambling alongside the fence, as we had done, Robert was following the ‘correct’ route for his ascent, taking a very meandering path that gained height gradually in a series of switchbacks. This also suited Ralph, who was getting on in years. However, looking from above, Robert hardly appeared to be getting anywhere at all. First he would move across the slope to the right for several yards, then over to the left, back to the right, and so on. With Ralph plodding behind. It seemed to take for ever. Robert never looked up to see how far he’d got. He just kept his eyes carefully on the ground as he chose his path. It was not until he finally reached the top of the slope that he saw us all standing there watching.

“Good evening,” he said.

I must admit I was impressed by Robert’s demeanour. Not only had he just ascended a steep slope without a pause, but he had also come face to face with three people he evidently meant to

surprise. Yet Robert greeted us with a casual ‘good evening’ as though we had been expecting him. A bit of a gent really, although Tam and Richie probably regarded him as ‘posh’.

“Everything under control?”

“Yes,” I said. “We’ve just got to add the finishing touches tomorrow.”

“Good.”

“Are you going to speak to Mr McCrindle?” I asked.

“No, that’s your job,” he replied.

“What about Donald?”

“I’m here on my own account,” he said. “You need to report direct to him...if and when appropriate.”

Then, after a polite nod to Tam and Richie, Robert turned and went back the way he had come, with Ralph trailing after him. Why he’d journeyed all this way to see us remained unclear. If he was merely snooping, as Tam put it, then it was only in a most harmless way because he’d given the fence nothing more than a cursory inspection in passing. He was unfamiliar with the technical side of fencing anyway, and was probably only taking a proprietorial interest in a business he could no longer influence. It was like a powerless head of state paying a visit to foreign subjects about whom he knew little. He stayed a short while just to remind us that he existed, and then he went away again. His role was generally unimportant, and as he disappeared into the gathering dusk I couldn’t help feeling sorry for him.

“It’s the dog I feel sorry for,” remarked Tam.

When we were convinced Robert had definitely gone the three of us trudged back up the field. We found the truck in the darkness and headed for the gate. On the way out we passed Mr McCrindle’s van coming in. He flashed his headlights. I flashed back in a friendly way and we fled.



By the time I’d got home, washed and changed and gone out again, the Leslie Fairbanks evening was in full swing. Leslie Fairbanks had a residency at the Crown Hotel Public Bar. Once a week he performed his musical programme entitled ‘Reflections of Elvis’ to what seemed to be the entire local population. We lived in a quiet place on the road to Perth, and the Crown Hotel was the only establishment you could get a drink apart from the Co-Op off-licence. It occupied one side of a small square opposite the bank at the top of the main street. Which was, in fact, the only street. I don’t think Leslie Fairbanks was his real name: I’d seen him once or twice behind the wheel of a lorry with the words ‘L. G. Banks, Road Haulage’ stencilled on the side of the cab. Leslie Fairbanks was his chosen stage persona for the nights he appeared with his accordion. Sometimes the show was billed as ‘Reflections of Hank’ by way of a change, but he always remained Leslie Fairbanks. He generally wore a spangled waistcoat for the occasion. A hundred or so people turned up on such evenings at the Crown Hotel, and they needed to be entertained. Leslie Fairbanks had acquired an amplifier for this purpose, and always spent an hour beforehand setting up his equipment and carrying out a sound check, assisted by a youth in dark glasses. Jock the barman, polishing the surface of his counter, could never for the life of him understand why they had to turn it up so loud. It was more than a man could bear. Jock kept a pair of spectacles on a chain round his neck, and he would frequently peer through them at the tangle of cables running from the low stage to the mixing desk.

“Whatever do they need all those for?” he would ask anyone he thought might listen to him. Nobody did. They came to the Crown to drink, and on the nights Leslie Fairbanks played they just drank more. This was rural Scotland. There was nothing else to do.

The amplified accordion sounded like some endless, mournful dirge as I approached through the drizzle that evening, but the lights of the Crown Hotel were too bright to let that discourage me. Once inside the door a more convivial noise took over, as Leslie Fairbanks's endeavours were augmented by the combined racket of drinks being served, laughter and shouted arguments. The place was packed, bodies pressed against each other in a churning mass of persons bent on enjoying themselves despite the odds. Meanwhile, Jock bawled over the tops of people's heads and kept general order at the bar, assisted when things got especially busy by a girl called Morag Paterson. Sales always increased marginally while Morag was behind the counter, but she was only helping out and most of the time she remained at the other side amongst the customers. Seated on one of the barstools nearby was Mr Finlayson, the greenkeeper at the local golf course. His three sons also drank here. One of them was Tam. He was sitting at a big table with his brother Billy and some of their cohort, so I worked my way across the room. They watched me approach and I saw Billy ask Tam something. Tam nodded, then looked up at me as I joined them.

"Alright to sit here?"

"If you like."

They made a space for me and I sat down, glancing round. "No Richie?"

"We're not married, you know," Tam replied.

"No, I know," I said. "I just wondered where he was, that's all."

Tam looked at me. "Rich can't come out tonight. He's got to pay the instalment on his guitar."

"Oh, I didn't know he played the guitar. What sort?"

"You'll have to ask him, won't you?"

"Yeah, 'spose."

I tried to engage Tam in some conversation about fencing, how many miles he'd done, and where, and so forth, but he didn't seem interested in talking. Judging by the number of empty glasses on the table he'd already had quite a lot to drink before I got there. Also, it wasn't easy competing against the continual din in the background, especially when a loud 'clunk' signalled that a microphone was being plugged into Leslie Fairbanks's amplifier. I shortly became aware of a man's voice, apparently singing. Someone had got hold of a mike from behind the bar, and was standing next to Leslie Fairbanks singing as if his life depended on it. His voice was nasal, to the extent that it sounded as if there was a clothes peg clipped onto his nose. He sang with his eyes shut and his fists clenched, while Leslie Fairbanks followed on the accordion, his head tilted to one side, and a faint smile on his face. He appeared to have no objection at all to being usurped by this floor singer and I began to think it was probably something that happened every week. No one else in the place seemed to take the slightest notice of the new addition on stage. They just carried on drinking and shouting a little louder. This more or less put paid to any further talk, so I entertained myself by lining up empty beer glasses with each other across the table-top, watched with vague interest by Tam. It had been a fairly pleasant evening so far, but things began to change after Morag Paterson came to collect up a trayful of empties. It would probably have been alright if Jock hadn't been too busy to do the job himself. Jock would have parted the crowd roughly and elbowed his way round the tables, grabbing five glasses with each hand and finding something to be grumpy about. Instead it was Morag who appeared, gently leaning over to ask if I'd mind passing the empty glasses. I hardly looked at her, but after she'd gone Tam began to slowly ferment. Several times I caught him staring at me and I had to pretend to be listening intently to Leslie Fairbanks and his partner, who were now in full flow. Tam had been drinking pints of heavy all night, and as he drained the latest one I thought I heard him say

something like: "Well, it's about time ex-foreman Tam Finlayson bought the new English foreman a drink, is it not?"

Whatever his intention had been when he rose to his feet, something must have got to Tam before he got to me, because instead of asking what I would like to drink, he just lunged at me across the table, so that several glasses went over. I leaned back to avoid him and next moment he had reared up and was standing before me yelling "C'mon, English bastards!" at the top of his voice.

As far as I knew I was the only English person in the place, so I stood up at my side of the table and waited to see what happened. Tam looked like he was about to make another lunge when Billy intervened.

"Tam, no!" he shouted.

"English bastards!" Tam screamed. It was odd the way he kept going on about 'bastards' in the plural. This suggested it was nothing personal.

Then Billy got Tam in a sort of bear-hug and they both toppled sideways onto the floor amongst the seething mass of drinkers. One or two people began jeering playfully.

Leslie Fairbanks, man of the moment, saw what happened but decided to press on during the disturbance, somehow managing to change to a much slower, more soothing tune without anybody noticing. This had the interesting side effect of causing his vocal accomplice to fall temporarily silent. In the resulting calm Tam and his brother resurfaced and were all smiles. Billy said something in Tam's ear and put his arm round his shoulder.

The incident seemed to have been already forgotten by most of the bystanders. Their father sitting at the bar, had turned round on his stool, vaguely aware of some commotion, but quickly lost interest and began to contemplate his drink again. My glass was amongst those that had been knocked over, and as a result it was now empty. As I forlornly stood it upright on the table, Tam settled down opposite me. Billy sat next to him, a large grin on his face.

"I'm sorry," said Tam.

"That's OK."

"No, really. I'm very, very sorry."

"Yeah, well."

"C'mere." Tam reached over the table and clasped my hand. Now he wanted to be my friend, my buddy.

"Like a drink?"

"Go on then."

As Tam lurched off to the bar Billy said, "Don't worry about Tam. If he goes like that again just come and get me."

"Thanks," I said. "What am I going to do with him when we get to England?"

Billy just shrugged.

There was a squeal over at the bar. Tam had managed to spill beer across the counter and most of it had gone over Morag Paterson. Despite the squeal she didn't seem particularly upset. In fact, she was laughing. It was my beer, of course, that Tam had spilt, and after a while I realized he wasn't coming back with another one. Eventually I went and bought a drink each for me and Billy. Making sure it was Jock who served me.



Tam was late for work next day, so I sat in the truck with Richie, waiting for him to turn up.

"Go out last night?" I asked.

“Couldn’t afford it,” he replied, lighting a cigarette.

“Tam tells me you play the guitar.”

“Well, I’m still learning it really,” he said. “I’ve only had it three weeks.”

“What sort is it then?”

“Electric.”

Richie was not being very forthcoming, so I gave up trying to interview him about his hobbies. Instead we sat silently in the cab as it slowly filled with smoke. Eventually Tam arrived, failing to provide any excuse for his lateness, and we set off on what we hoped would be our last trip to Mr McCrindle’s. It was imperative we got his fence finished today at all costs, or we’d never hear the last of him.

He was nowhere to be seen when we arrived, which was a good start. He must have been occupied at another part of the farm. While Tam and Richie prepared the wire-tightening equipment went off to take a measurement of the fence, something we’d forgotten to do the day before. This was simply a matter of running a measuring wheel along the entire length of the fence. A small meter at the side of the device clicked up 513 yards. (Donald had decided not to convert from yards to metres because, as he put it, most farmers were incapable of thinking metrically.) When I got back Tam asked me how long the fence was.

“513 yards,” I told him.

“I’ll measure it,” he announced, taking the wheel and setting off down the field. I let him get on with it as there was plenty of time to spare. When he came back the meter read 522. I don’t know how he achieved this figure, but I recorded it all the same. Now we could concentrate on getting Mr McCrindle’s new fence up to the required level of tension. Tam had elected to do the re-tightening. I didn’t protest as it was his fence officially, and he was supposed to be a good judge of torque. I sent Richie down to the bottom of the field to keep an eye on the job from that end, then all I had to do was stand and watch in my capacity as foreman.

The wire-tightening gear consisted of a wire-gripper and a chain winch. Tam began the process by anchoring the winch to the straining post at the start of the fence. This was a substantial piece of timber, dug deep into the ground and supported by a strut at forty-five degrees. He then fixed the gripper to the bottom wire and slowly tightened it by means of a handle which ‘walked’ link by link along the chain. When he was satisfied with the tension he tied the wire off at the post, and moved up to the next one. As Tam settled into his work the true form of the fence began to appear. The second wire was tightened, then the third, and fourth, each providing a new taut parallel line. It was beginning to look good. At last I could see how perfectly straight the line of posts was, and there was no sign of any weakening of the structure. Tam would pull his handle to the left, re-position his feet and pull to the right, and so on, until, slowly, the correct level of tension was reached. As usual Tam wore his rubber boots, and he was digging his heels hard into the ground to maintain his balance as he heaved on the handle. At last he came to the top and final wire. This was the most important one, especially in a fence intended to restrain cows, because of their tendency to lean over and eat the grass on the other side. It therefore had to be especially tight. Tam placed the gripper on the wire and carefully cranked the handle one way, then the other. And again one way, then the other. Very slowly now. One way, then the other. He paused.

“That should do it,” I said. The whole fence was humming under the strain.

“I think I’ll give it one more,” said Tam. He looked at me for a long moment. “We don’t want it going slack again, do we?”

“Suppose not.”

He planted his feet and began to heave carefully. He really was taking this to the limit this time. It was just as he got the handle about halfway that I noticed Mr McCrindle had joined us. I don't know where he'd come from, but he was now standing directly behind Tam, watching him work. Maybe it was Mr McCrindle's sudden appearance that caused Tam to lose his footing. I'm not really sure, it all happened so quickly. Mr McCrindle said something and Tam seemed to glance sideways. Next thing his balance had gone and he was jerked off his feet. The shock of the change in direction sent the chain snaking upwards for a moment. A moment just long enough for the gripper to release the wire and fly back towards Mr McCrindle. He was still speaking as it hit the side of his head.

It sounded to me like 'Norbert' or maybe 'Noydle'. Whatever he was saying, the words trailed off as Mr McCrindle keeled over. I stepped forward to catch him, and discovered how difficult it can be to hold someone upright when they appear to have stopped trying. So I leant him against the fence.

Mr McCrindle had a very surprised look on his face. His eyes were wide open, but he was, apparently, dead.

Three

Tam looked at Mr McCrindle and then turned to me. “I didn’t mean to do that,” he said.
“I know you didn’t,” I replied.

“He shouldn’t have kept sneaking up on us.”

“Never mind that now.”

Any distant observer of this scene would have probably assumed that the three figures standing by the new fence were in deep conversation about something. In fact, there were only two participants in the conversation.

“What do you think he was saying?”

“Dunno,” said Tam. “Could’ve been ‘Nice work, boys,’ maybe.”

“Or ‘Not too tight, Tam,’” I suggested. “I didn’t catch the last bit.”

There was a bit of a breeze blowing that day. It rustled a nearby line of trees and caused Mr McCrindle to sway ever so slightly as he stood leaning against the wires.

Tam shivered and zipped up his jerkin.

“Here’s Rich,” he said.

We watched as Richie slowly trudged up the field in our direction, glancing every now and then at the fence.

“The top wire’s still slack,” he said as he joined us, and then “Oh, hello, Mr McCrindle.”

When there was no reply he turned and gave me a puzzled frown.

“Tam’s just accidentally killed Mr McCrindle,” I explained.

“Oh...er...oh,” he said, and looked at Mr McCrindle again.

“He must have come to see about getting his cows turned out,” remarked Tam.

We moved Mr McCrindle out of the way and leaned him against the truck so that we could get the fence completed properly. Tam cranked up the top wire and tied it off at the post. I noticed the time he didn’t take the tension quite as far as before.

When he’d finished we all stood and regarded the new fence, its wires shimmering in the cold afternoon light.

After a long silence Richie said, “What are we going to do with Mr McCrindle?”

“Well,” I replied. “I suppose we’d better bury him.”

This was my first major decision as foreman. Amongst the equipment in the back of the truck was a tool for digging post holes. It was made up of two long-handled spades coupled together to form a pair of tongs. The straining posts which anchored a fence at each end had to be set in deep, narrow holes, and this tool was perfect for the job. If we dug a hole a little deeper and wider than usual, there’d be plenty of room for Mr McCrindle.

“Let Richie dig it,” said Tam. “He’s best.”

With a bashful look of concentration on his face Richie made a cut into the surface, slicing out the turf and placing it to one side. Then he started working into the ground below. Each excavation was the same basic movement. He drove the digger into the bottom of the hole, worked the handles around to get a grip, then closed them together and lifted out the soil, which he deposited on a pile

next to him.

—— I could see that Richie was working much faster than normally would be expected for this sort of task.

“Slow down a bit,” I said. “You’ll wear yourself out.”

He rested for a moment but soon pressed on again. There was no stopping him and he was quickly down into the undersoil. As he delved deeper he had to bend further and further over the hole until finally he was holding the handles at arm’s length and could reach down no more. This was as far as Richie could go, so he stopped and straightened up.

“That’s it,” he said.

Tam and I took hold of Mr McCrindle and lowered him into the hole, feet first. We decided to leave his cap on.

Richie had just started shovelling the soil back when Tam made a suggestion.

“Why don’t we put a post in as well, to make it look more realistic?”

“We haven’t got any spare posts with us,” I said.

“There’s one lying in that ditch over there,” he replied.

“What’s it doing over there?”

“We had one left over when we built the fence, so we dumped it in that ditch.”

“But you’re supposed to take surplus timber away at the end of each job. Donald keeps a record of everything used, you know.”

Tam shrugged.

“Why didn’t you take it back?”

“Couldn’t be bothered.”

I considered his idea. “Won’t it look a bit funny, a post just standing here on its own?”

“Not really,” he said. “Somebody might come and hang a gate on it one day.”

“Who?”

“I dunno...somebody.”

When I thought about it I agreed he was probably right. There were a lot of posts in the countryside which seemed to be there for no apparent purpose. Some had been waiting many years for a long-forgotten gate to be hung on them. Others started life as the straining posts of fences which, for some reason or other, were never completed. This spare post could join them.

So we fetched it from the ditch where it lay and put it in the hole with Mr McCrindle. Then we back-filled the soil and packed it tight. Tam was very gentle as he replaced the slices of turf and pressed them down with his boot. The finished job looked quite tidy. When we stood back it looked just like an ordinary gatepost. Maybe someone would indeed come along and hang a gate on it one day.

Tam rested his hand on the post. “Things like this are bound to happen from time to time,” he said.

After that there was nothing left to do, so we put all the gear in the back of the truck and got ready to leave. Already the light was beginning to fade. As dusk approached, the trees stirred and the rising breeze began to sing in the fence wires.



On the way home a thought occurred to me.

“He was dead, wasn’t he?”

“I’m sure he was,” said Richie. “What about his cows?”

“They’ll be alright.”



It was time to go to England. N°3 Gang were being dispatched on Tuesday morning at eight o’clock, and Robert had been given the job of breaking the news officially. I herded Tam and Richie into his office so that he could deliver a short speech.

“Hitherto you’ve carried out all your work on or near your home ground,” he began. “This does not mean, however, that any particular precedent is thereby established. Market forces do not recognize feudal boundaries, and if contracts arise further afield then clearly Mohammed must go to the mountain. You also need to bear in mind that building a fence is a combined social and technical exercise...”

While Robert went on in this way Tam and Richie stood near the door, looking awkward and nodding each time he paused. I glanced around the room and wondered what he did in here all day long. He had a chair and a desk, but no filing cabinet or telephone, nothing to keep him occupied. In the corner was a low table, under which Ralph lay ignoring the proceedings. Meanwhile, in the adjoining office, a typewriter was being tapped unsteadily. It had always struck me as a bit odd that there was no doorway between Donald and Robert, not even a hatch, so that to communicate with each other they had to go outside into the yard, and back in through the other door.

Presently I noticed that the tapping had stopped. Then I heard quiet footsteps moving behind the partition wall. Evidently Donald was listening in to what was being said. Robert had now turned to the subject of future developments in fencing.

“The high-tension fence is the way forward,” he was saying. “The prospects of the company depend on it.”

Robert had never really got to grips with the term ‘high-tensile’, as favoured by Donald, and persisted in quaintly referring to ‘high-tension fences’. For this reason he didn’t sound very convincing. I suspected that deep down he was a Luddite who secretly preferred old-fashioned conventional fences. Maybe Donald suspected him as well.

As I stood pondering all this I suddenly became aware that Robert had finished his speech and was now sitting behind his desk smiling vaguely.

“Right, thanks for coming in,” he said.

We said it was OK and the three of us trooped outside. As we did so the tapping next door started up again.

The truck was parked across the yard, so we all got in and I reversed it round to the tool shed.

“Got a fag, Rich?” said Tam, and Richie went into the routine with the cigarette pack in his shirt pocket, and the lighter fished out of his jeans. We sat there for a while as they smoked in silence and then at last Tam spoke.

“What the fuck was Robert talking about?” he said.



Earlier in the day I’d seen Donald separately for my instructions. We were to make preparations for a long journey. It was intended that we should stay away for the entire duration of the contract.

“It’s only a few weeks,” he said. “Then you can come back.”

The company kept a caravan for jobs like this. It was a blue and white model, built to accommodate four persons, and was parked round the back of the timber yard. I asked Tam to go and

give the caravan a check while Richie and I sorted out the tools and equipment we'd be needing. Five minutes later Tam came back.

"Right, I've checked it," he said.

"Oh, good. That was quick."

"Is that me then?" he asked.

"I suppose so," I said. "See you tomorrow. Eight o'clock."

Sometime after he'd gone I happened to go past the caravan. It was standing in the middle of a huge clump of nettles, and both tyres were flat. I managed to get the door open and have a look inside. It was like a tip. There were cupboards hanging open, mattresses overturned and a bottle of sour milk stood in the sink. This was going to be our home for the next few weeks. I went and found Richie.

"Look at this," I said. "I thought Tam said he'd checked it."

"He probably did."

It took the two of us more than an hour to get the tyres pumped up and the inside of the caravan fit for habitation. By this time Richie's interest was beginning to flag, so I decided to sort out the rest of the gear myself and let him go home as well. A few minutes after he'd gone Donald came out of the office.

"What time did you tell Tam and Richie tomorrow?"

"Eight o'clock," I said. "That's what you told me."

"Well, there's been a change of plan. I've just had Mr Perkins on the phone and he wants you to be there before dark so he can show you round."

Mr Perkins was the client in England.

"Can't he show me round next morning? We're bound to arrive after dark, it's miles away."

"He won't be there," said Donald. "He lives somewhere else. You'll just have to leave earlier."

"How early?"

"I suggest six o'clock."

"Well, can I use the phone to ring up Tam and Richie?"

"They're not on the telephone."

"What, neither of them?"

"No."

"What am I going to do then?"

"You'll just have to go and see them."

As Donald turned back towards his office I remembered something else I wanted to ask him.

"By the way," I said. "Tam seems a bit upset about not being foreman any more. I was wondering if you could make him charge hand, sort of officially?"

"Charge hand?"

"Yes."

"It's not a grade we recognize."

"Well couldn't we recognize it just this once?" I tried.

"I'm afraid not," said Donald, going inside and closing the door behind him.

Richie lived with his parents on a small farm about ten miles away. I had no choice but to get in the truck and drive all the way out there. It was dark by the time I pulled up in the deserted farmyard. A single light shone in the downstairs window. I knocked on the door and after a while Mr Campbell opened up.

“Oh hello,” I said. “I’ve come to tell Richie we’ve got to go earlier than expected tomorrow morning.”

“I suppose you’d better come in.”

She led me through to the living room where Richie’s father was sitting in front of a stick fire.

“Richard’s got to go off early tomorrow,” said Mrs Campbell.

“I see,” replied her husband, looking at me. “I’ll just have to do the cows myself.”

Richie’s mother disappeared into the depths of the house. Mr Campbell continued looking me for some time.

“So you’re the new foreman?” he said.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I see,” he said, and turned back towards the fire. He was seated in a deep armchair with flat, square sides. Beside it was another armchair, identical and at present empty. I assumed this was Mrs Campbell’s. Between them was a small three-legged table. There were some lumps of coal waiting in a bucket next to the fireplace, but at the moment Richie’s father was burning sticks. On the shelf above the hearth a clock ticked slowly. The crackle of the flames and the ticking were the only sounds to be heard. I tried without success to imagine an electric guitar being learnt in this house.

After a while Mrs Campbell came back in. “Richard’s just getting ready to go out,” she said. “Will you have a cup of tea while you wait?”

“Er, no. Thanks anyway,” I replied. “I just wanted to tell him about leaving early, that’s all. I’ll have to go soon.”

Mr Campbell looked up at me over the rim of his glasses. “You’ll have a cup of tea.”

I agreed that I would have a cup of tea, and Mrs Campbell withdrew to the kitchen. Behind the two armchairs was a tall oak dresser, and on one of the shelves I noticed a framed picture of a small boy adrift in a rowing boat. The black and white photograph had been taken years before, but the small boy was undoubtedly Richie. There was also a photo of someone I took to be Mr Campbell in his younger days. I glanced at the older version sitting in the armchair. For some reason Richie’s father reminded me of Mr McCrindle.

After a few minutes Mrs Campbell returned with the tea, and a tiny cake. I was on my second cup when Richie at last emerged from the back of the house. His mother had said he was getting ready to go out, but I could see no difference in his appearance except that his hair was now washed and shiny, and his Wellingtons had been replaced by cowboy boots. I told him the news. He sat down in a hard chair on the opposite side of the fireplace to the bucket of coal.

“Have you told Tam?” he asked.

“I’ll tell him in the pub later,” I said.

“What time?”

“Six.”

He looked glum. “I was going out tonight.”

“And me,” I said. “This was Donald’s idea.”

“I’ll have to do the cows myself,” said Mr Campbell again.

After a few more ticks of the clock I showed myself out, leaving Richie and his parents sitting in silence before their stick fire. When I got outside the door I stopped for a moment and listened. Nothing. Somewhere in a nearby field a cow lowed, but there was no other sound. In total darkness I found the truck and drove off.

So this was the life of a foreman. I seemed to be spending most of my time ferrying pieces

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