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The Farm

Richard Benson

I give a false name and address when I sign for the keys.

It is five o'clock on a late December night, already dark. The estate agent's office has a Christmas tree in the comer and blinking lights Blu-tacked around the windows.

'London,' says the woman behind the desk, looking at the address I have written in the log book. 'We get ever so many up from London now. We seem to be the in place!'

'Oh,' I say.

'Must be t' fresh air.' She is making me a bit nervous with her talking. Someone might come in and recognize me, so I want to get out of the office. She pushes the keys across the desk and smiles. 'Let us know what you think tomorrow, if you can.'

I drive back out to our village and up to the caravan in the spinney to collect my dad.

The house that my dad and I have come to view is a newly converted barn, huddled with other converted farm buildings around a small gravelled courtyard in our village. We are standing outside its large, stable-style front door, me untangling the knot of keys lent by the estate agent, and my dad warily eyeing the one house in the courtyard with lights on. He is worried about being seen here. I have persuaded him to accompany me by promising that at this hour the neighbours would still be at work. Now, in the shadows thrown by the far porchlight, both his complaisance and his curiosity about the barn's damp-proofing are yielding to doubt.

'Mebbe tha's got t' wrong keys,' he whispers.

‘It says "barn" on the tag.'

‘Try turning t' handle t' other way then.'

The doors swing open. Nervously we step in, close the doors behind us, and turn on the lights. The decor is fussily mock-rustic: low, beamed ceilings, exposed chalk and brick walls, pastel flowers painted on every available surface. In the lavatory by the

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front door, the toilet bowl and cistern are decorated with pastel, willow-pattern prints. In the farmhouse-style kitchen along the hall, some of the ceramic tiles are in the form of pastel-painted bas-relief fruits - a feature which seems to impress my dad, who is looking bemused.

'Fancy, in't it?' he whispers, gingerly prodding at a pale-green ceramic pear.

'I suppose so,' I say.

We are both uneasy. Running his hand along a beam, my dad observes that the ceiling seems very low and then, stepping backwards, he bangs his head against a glass lampshade decorated with primroses. The shade swings violently. 'I'm scared I'm going to break summat,' he says, reaching out to steady it. 'Let's have a look at that wall instead.'

He steps up to the exposed chalk wall and runs his fingertips over the stones, squinting in contemplation.

'I don't understand this leaving chalk and brick bare. Not in houses.'

'I think it's fashionable.'

'I know it's fashionable, I've seen it on telly,' he says. 'But to me it looks mucky. If I were buying a new house I'd want it to look clean.'

He rubs at the patches of salt crystals sprouting where dampness has come through the rock. 'Tha sees, I thought they'd have trouble damp-proofing t' chalk. Chalk loves water, and water's its own master ... What's tha looking at?'

I have found, at head-height on the far side of the room, a pair of the eighteen-inch slits that once provided the building's light and ventilation. The slits have been covered with a pane of glass decorated with an oddly-shaped sea creature. I am remembering one summer, many years ago now, working in shafts of sunlight shining through them.

'I'm just looking at that. . . dolphin.'

'Oh,' he says, walking over. 'I thought it were a fish.'

'It could well be a fish.'

We stand side by side, considering the dolphin-fish. Outside in the courtyard, kitchen lights are going on.

My dad watches a car pulling up outside the house opposite. 'We'd better be getting on-'

'How do you feel being here, Dad?' I blurt out.

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He doesn't say anything.

'I just meant. . . does it bother you?'

He looks down and sighs. 'It's hard to say, lad, I -'

Suddenly there is a knock at the front door. The latch lifts. My dad ducks out of view.

'Hello?' A woman's voice curls in round the door.

'Hi!' I call back, casually jogging back down the hall.

'Can I help you at all?' The woman is in her fifties, with short grey hair, gold jewellery, and rather hawklike eyes. She is very obviously trying to memorize my appearance in case she is later called upon to describe me to a police officer.

Tm just viewing,' I say. 'I got the keys from the estate agent.' To emphasize this, I hold them up in front of her.

'Oh! Right - right,' she says. She looks slightly disappointed. 'I live across there, and just saw the lights on, you know.'

'It's good to know people keep a look out.'

'Have to, these days.' The woman shows no interest in leaving. Folding her arms under her bosom, and leaning against the lavatory door jamb, she seems to be settling in for a chat. 'Have you come far?'

'London. Grew up here, but thinking of coming back.'

'Oh, I'm an out-of-towner myself. Leeds. We've been here a year and a bit.' She says 'a year and a bit' as if it were half a lifetime.

'Right.'

She smiles and nods.

'Do you like it here?'

'Ooh, smashing. This courtyard's so quiet, you can go all day without seeing a soul.'

'Sounds lovely.'

'It used to be a farmyard, you know.'

'Yes,' I said. 'I know.'

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