

Reunion

The bulky man who emerged from the hire car outside Old Mill Barn was under-dressed for the fresh season: just a T-shirt and thin cotton jacket above his jeans. His Oakleys could suggest either sophistication or optimism about the spring sunshine, thought Janie Donoghue as she looked through the casement window from the main farmhouse across the road. The flaws in the small old panes through which she watched gave the man's outline a hall-of-mirrors waywardness as he approached the side door of the barn conversion.

'Gavin's here,' said Janie under her breath to her husband, who was walking into the sitting room carrying two coffees.

'Stop spying on my sister's house,' said Frank. 'Rachel of all people has a need for privacy.'

'I only said he's arrived. Big man, grey hair – not much of it on top. Large suitcase for a three-week stay. Maybe he's brought presents for the family. But Rachel's pair of twenty-year-olds won't be easily bought, I shouldn't think.'

Frank's dark eyes darkened further. 'No reason why they shouldn't be positive. They've been following him online since Rachel told them she's re-established contact.'

'I expect you're right. Rachel told me they even helped her to find Gavin on the net. But a lot can happen to a man in twenty-five years.' Janie stirred sugar into her drink, a habit that told on her middle-aged waist. 'He was unsuitable before – who knows what sort of man he's become? But then, no one goes into an ill-judged marriage with more enthusiasm than your sister. By the way, I can smell the whisky.'

'Is it a crime?'

'It's noticeable at eleven in the morning, in your coffee.'

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The upturn in her voice irritated Frank further but he would not be lured on to this treacherous ground. ‘Just give Rachel some space.’ His protectiveness was not born solely out of a farmer’s natural inclination to solitude. The violent unsuitability of his sister’s long second marriage had caused almost as much trouble to him as to her, until its abrupt ending.

The first, brief union had been entered into over two decades earlier during a working holiday in Western Australia, and had ended as hurriedly as it had begun. But Frank believed Rachel’s recent cautious contact once again with her first husband could mark a turn in her fortunes. She had steadily re-forged her relationship with Gavin using countless megabytes over the last three years, before greeting him in person once more. Just six months ago she had retired from the council and re-visited that vast continent.

‘They’ve each put a second marriage well behind them –,’ continued Frank.

‘– one way or another –’ put in Janie,

‘– and I’m relieved it’s working out for them. Perhaps she’ll finally get the chance to enjoy the rest of her life. She’s not had it easy like you.’

Janie ignored him with easy confidence. She knew Frank’s occasional jibes helped him to deal with the inferiority that his married-in status caused him to feel. The farm had been hers alone before she’d added Frank’s name to the deeds, and she needed no agricultural college to instruct her how to run it. She continued watching as the side door of the Old Mill Barn was opened by an unseen hand and the visitor eased first his suitcase and then his body through the narrow aperture.

Five days later the men were slumped in re-furbished leather armchairs before the inglenook at Mill Farm. Frank had marked the first meal with his prospective brother-in-law by opening a bottle of single malt. He noted Gavin’s ability to match him, glass for glass, as they each steadily

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breathed the amber liquid into their bodies. It was late, and Janie and Rachel had already retired for the night.

‘Slick operation you’ve got,’ said Gavin. ‘Farming’s well subsidised over here, they tell me.’ He had retained his English accent: just a slight Australian twang, and an occasional uptick at the end of his sentences.

‘There are grants.’ The back of Frank’s neck prickled. ‘But that doesn’t make it an easy life.’

‘I didn’t say it was,’ said Gavin, with care. ‘Use much seasonal help?’

‘Our daughter’s in the agricultural contracting business, so she helps out. We’re all arable round here, of course – none of your livestock.’

‘Back home we use a lot of casual labour,’ said Gavin. ‘Bright-eyed youngsters wanting to connect with the big wide world. First thing the old hands make them do is kill a ewe with a knife, to prove they’re up to the job.’

Frank chuckled. ‘Sorts out the men from the boys, I expect. We’re not licensed here for butchering.’

‘Ours is a big country.’

‘Rachel tells me you’ve done very well for yourself,’ said Frank. ‘She said that when you and she met the first time around you were working the Aussie bars, just like her.’

‘It’s true. And when she left I stayed and got involved with sheep. Then our Government took away most of the farming subsidies, and only the fittest survived. I’m working two thousand square miles now.’ Gavin took a long sip of whisky and replaced his glass, then spread his fingers wide on the arms of his chair.

Frank braced himself, but the question that came was not about the extent of his own acreage.

‘What do I need to know?’ said Gavin.

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The horse chestnut logs on the fire were smouldering insidiously, without smoke or flame. Frank leaned forward and tossed on some hornbeam to enliven the heat. The men sat listening to the sharp explosions of sap, while the flickering flames re-ignited and long shadows took up their places once more in the corners of the snug.

‘About Rachel? Don’t you know it all already?’

Gavin narrowed his eyes in his broad, leathery face. ‘Let’s get something out of the way: I’m getting a second bite of a beautiful cherry. No – don’t be offended: I’ve always been a straight talker. That’s why I’m at home down under.’

Frank’s shoulders descended from the tenth floor down to the fifth as he leant back in his chair again. Gavin continued.

‘Your sister’s a good woman, I’m in a position now to treat her well and I will treat her well. Take it as read. So let’s be straight with each other, farmer to farmer. What do I need to know about the disappearance – four years ago was it?’

Frank reached down to the table and picked up an e-cigarette. He inhaled and grimaced as a blue glow lit up the tip. ‘The day they bring out e-whisky I’m out of here. Yes, it was round about this time of year. We were just about to start ploughing ready for the maize. We grow it for our bio-digester – convert it into electricity. It’s a good, ecological business.’

‘Another Government incentive?’ asked Gavin, but Frank carried on.

‘You’ll have seen the news reports on the net?’

‘Been carrying a handful of them around in my jacket the last few days, having a look round.’

As if proof was needed the naturalised Australian pulled a print-out from the pocket of the fleece which had been his constant protection since his first day back in England. He extracted a pair of reading glasses from a narrow case and caught Frank’s amused eye. ‘Thought I should support the optometrist at last.’ In response Frank stroked his fingers through his own still-thick dark hair, as Gavin read out loud, slowly.

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‘...Detective Chief Inspector John Brownlee said: “This disappearance is a very unusual incident and we are working carefully to establish what has happened. We are conducting a number of enquiries including area searches and we will make sure we leave no stone unturned”.’

When he finished reading Gavin took off his spectacles, raised an unequivocal gaze to Frank’s and spoke slowly, his voice thick with Scottish peat. ‘So I’ve walked around this village, and it seems to me from the reports that he was last seen walking on your land.’

‘Apparently he was,’ said Frank, raising his glass and turning to the fire.

‘The whole thing must have raised some excitement.’

‘It did.’

‘And I’m thinking, if someone disappears from your land, it’s not likely that you knew anything about it yourself, at the time.’

‘You’d think not.’

‘So it might just be a coincidence.’

Frank said nothing.

‘And the press gets excited, but no leads have come good?’

‘You’ve got the whole story there.’

‘Not quite...What sort of man was he?’

Frank took a deep breath and unclenched his jaw. ‘We all have our demons. But most of us have ways to manage them.’ He stroked his glass with coarse fingers, but his nails were clean. ‘He was the sort of man who used to disappear from time to time – I thought he just needed some space – many a man does. But it turned out that when he went off Rachel had usually been on the rough end of things.’

‘Your brother-in-law was on your property, beating up your sister?’ Gavin’s voice had deepened to an incredulous growl.

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‘Back up,’ warned Frank, his own voice dropping half an octave. ‘Not in a way that anyone could see – there are some kinds of violence a woman doesn’t talk about. But I worked it out.’

The men fell silent for some minutes, the glowing logs shifting slightly before them.

After a while Gavin began again. ‘So I reflect some more and I think maybe if someone got in a temper – if they thought a woman was being roughed up once too often by her man, for example – and they were driven to do something final...then they might be faced with a job of disposal.’

Frank was silent.

‘It was the start of the maize ploughing, you said?’

‘It’s a tall crop – deep furrows. A lot of the farms round here grow it.’

“‘Plough deep while sluggards sleep,” quoted Gavin, “and you shall have corn to sell and to keep”. But all the maize in this village is headed for your bio-digester?’

‘The whole lot. It’s a clean operation – the electricity goes straight back into the national grid.’

‘Nice business...Getting back to the story?’

‘There were house-to-house enquiries,’ said Frank, ‘but no one local knew anything and a wider search drew out nothing. Seems even the Police don’t always get all the answers. But they say their files are never closed.’ He leant forward and gave the fire a poke. ‘So, like I said, you’ve got the whole story now. You can take Rachel back with you, no loose ends. You’ll take care of her.’ It wasn’t a question. ‘She’s a resilient woman, but she needs to be looked after.’

‘She’s the best,’ said Gavin. ‘And there’s work for her boys if they want to come out.’

The whisky was starting to tell on them both, but Frank knew his chance would not come again. He unplugged the bottle once more and threw the cork on the fire. ‘Well, we might as well finish this before we turn in...Want to talk about your own second marriage?’

Gavin remained watchful of the increasingly drowsy Frank as he responded slowly, and with finality. ‘Nope. Nothing else you and I need to talk about now.’