

## I

Ramblers. Daft sods in pink and green hats. It wasn't even cold. They moved down the field swing-swaying like a line of drunks, addled with the air and the land, and the smell of manure. I watched them from up top, their bright heads peeping through the fog.

Sat on my rock there I let the world busy itself below, all manner of creatures going about their backwards-forwards same as always, never mind the fog had them half-sighted. But I could see above the fog. It bided under my feet, settled in the valley like a sump-pool spreading three miles over to the hills at Felton.

The ramblers hadn't marked me. They'd walked past the farm without taking notice, of me or of Father rounding up the flock from the moor. Oi there ramblers, I'd a mind for shouting, what the bugger are you doing, talking to that sheep? Do you think she fancies a natter, eh? And they'd have bowed down royal for me then, no doubt. So sorry, Mr Farmer, we won't do it again, I hope we haven't upset her. For that was the way with these – so respect-minded they wouldn't dare even look on myself for fear of crapping up Nature's balance. The laws of the countryside. And me, I was real, living, farting Nature to their brain of things, part of the scenery same as a tree or a tractor. I watched as the last one over the stile fiddled with a rock on top the wall, for he thought he'd knocked it out of place weighting himself over. Daft sods these ramblers. I went toward them.

Halfway down the field the fog got hold of me, feeling round my face so as I had to stop a minute and tune my eyes, though I still had sight of the hats, no bother. They were only a short way into the next field, moving on like a line of chickens, their heads twitching side to side. What a lovely molehill. Look, Bob, a cuckoo behind the drystone wall. Only it wasn't a cuckoo, I knew, it was a bloody pigeon.

I hadn't the hearing of them just yet, mind, but I knew their talk.

I followed on, quick down to the field bottom and straight over the wall. Tumbled a couple of headstones to the ground as I heaved myself up, but no matter. Part of Nature me, I'd a licence for that. They couldn't hear me anyhow, their ears were full of fog. I was in the field aside theirs and I slunk along the wall between, until they were near enough I could see them through the stone-cracks, bobbing along. I listened to them breathing, heavy, like towns always breathe when they're on farmland. Weekend exercise for them, this was, like sex. Course they were going to buy a pink hat to mark the occasion.

A middle of the way down the field and they stopped. They parked down in a circle like they fancied a campfire but instead they whipped out foil parcels and a Thermos and started blathering.

I've got ham. Who wants ham?

I'll have ham.

Oh, wait a moment. Pink Hat inspected the sarnies. We have a choice – ham and tomato, or ham and Red Leicester?

He gave them each a parcel, then stood the Thermos in the middle of the circle.

Nasty old day still, he said. Wish it would perk up a little.

Doesn't look too promising, though, said one of the females.

I teased a small stone out the wall and plastered it in sheep shit.

That is such nice ham.

Isn't it? Tesco, you know.

Crack. I hit the Thermos bang centre, tea and shit splashing up the fog.

They hadn't a clue. It was a job to keep from laughing as they skittled about and scanned the sky as if they were being bombed. Or maybe they feared they'd pissed the cuckoo off – upset Nature's balance, sitting in a field. Didn't think to look over at me crouching behind the wall. So down I went for the shit pile and I threw another stone, but it missed and hit a female on her foot. I might've flung a headstone at her and she'd not have felt it through them walking boots but that wasn't going to stop her screaming her lungs out her windpipe. Behind the wall, there's someone behind

the wall, quickly let's go. Quickly! They were all on their feet soon enough, grabbing up the picnic and escaping down the field. Run for your lives, towns, run for your lives. When they were out of range, Pink Hat turned and blabbed something about a peaceful day out, they meant no harm please leave them alone.

But I couldn't be fussed with them any more. I waited for them to scarper then I started back to the farm. The pups would be needing a feed, and I was rumbling for a bite myself.

Near the top the field I looked round to see how far they'd got, likely they were halfway to Felton by now, they were that upshelled. So I was fair capped when I saw they'd come back. I couldn't rightly make out what they were up to at first, all I could see was their heads huddled behind a wall and Pink Hat galloping up the hillside. He snatched something up off the ground and it glinted an instant before he put it in his rucksack. They'd left the tin foil behind.

In the old stable the pups were asleep, the four of them piled up snuffling against Jess's side. She had an eye awake, looking on while I took a plate of chopped liver off the shelf and lay it by for when they were ready. Then I went in the kitchen, and there was a smell drifting about that got in my nostrils and reached down my gullet. Biscuits. I opened the oven, but it was empty. Door was warmish, mind, like a cow's underbelly, and I pressed my hand against it a time, letting the heat slug up my arm before I stood up and went for the cupboards. No biscuits in any of them, so I sat down by the fire.

Mum was in the other room, and she was all I could hear but for the fire and the honeysuckle flapping against the window. She was on the phone to Janet. That, or she was talking to the budgerigars. Fat little fuckers, up to nothing all day but rubbing their heads together and gawping in the mirror. I got up and pushed the door to the other room, just a nudge, to poke my eye in. She was on the phone, and she had the biscuits. She was gobbing them whole while she yammered on to Janet.

Happy as a pig in trough he were, Janet, happy as a pig in trough . . .

I went for a gleg in the freezer to see if she'd done another batch, but it was just bags of sprouts and vaccination packs like always, so I gave up the biscuits and stood by the window, where just a chunter of talk came through the door-crack with the scratch of fingernails on the tin. The fog had cleared some and I could see the lump of Felton Top other side the valley. I knew them rambles were headed for the Top, filing downriver till the path jutted left up the hillside. Blimey, it's a fair old climb, but not to worry, there's a pint waiting for us on the other side.

I settled into the chair by the fire and let my body go to rest. The pub round the Top would be thronged today, full of rambles. I didn't think on it much longer, mind, for I dropped off soon enough, I was that snug, only the tap of honeysuckle on the window to listen to. Mum had quieted – Janet was on one – so I drowsied on, my head bare of thought until the wind got up and the tapping hardened. Is there no peace round here? I said, the one eye open. The honeysuckle wasn't moving, though, and I knew right away that sound, it was Father's boots on the path, and I straightened up.

He came in, didn't speak. In his left hand he had a dead rabbit. I could see by his face something was nettling him. He strew about the letters and papers on the tabletop, turning them over and knocking the salt so as it sprayed on the cloth. Then he was in the cupboards, leaving them all open before he turned back and the rabbit's head banged on a chair. He had it by the legs and there were spots of red on the floor where he'd walked through the kitchen. He took the cushion out the armchair aside me and jammed his hand down the back of it. He wasn't after the biscuits, then. I kept lipped up while he frisked the inside of the chair, dangling the rabbit by my feet, and Mum came in, the tin in her hands.

Guy. Have a biscuit. She offered him the tin, but he ignored it. What you looking for? she asked.

Whistle.

Here. She picked his whistle out the egg bowl then righted the salt up. Near went through t' washer, it did. You left it in your other trousers.

He put the whistle in his pocket and slumped into his chair.

Bending toward the fire, he set the rabbit on the hearth, laid out on its side so as it seemed to be stretching in the warmth with its eye fixed on me. Mighty fine spot for a snooze, this, it said. Father gave a stab to the fire and the room swelled with heat.

He looked at me. Them who've bought Turnbull's farm move in day after tomorrow, d' you know that, lad?

No. Who are they?

Towns. And you'll let them alone, an' all. He took himself a biscuit from the tin. They've a daughter.

I sat up top the field and watched them all the afternoon while the pups scuffled about me and my arse proper boned into the rock. I'd been in the yard messing about by the sheep-dip when I heard the cattle-grid rattling other side of our hill and I thought, hello, they're here, for I could tell between rattles and that wasn't one I had the knowing of. I was in my place before they even showed on the skyline. A mighty blue van coming along the track. I watched as it took the fork toward Turnbull's old place, slowing for each cattle-grid, until it disappeared a moment in the thick of trees in front the farmstead before pulling into the gateway. I fetched the whelps and sat them two each side of me, fooling myself they'd be mooded for staying put, and I settled in to view the doings half a mile down the hillside.

And look who was first out the van. The girl. Young. Fifteen maybe. The others got out – mum, dad, kid brother, two furniture lugs – and they went at clearing the van, mum and dad pointing commands, the fridge, yes, that goes indoors, as if they feared the lugger-buggers might set it in the vegetable plot, and the boy skittering about, unsure, like a louse on the flat of your hand. The girl got stuck in, mind, bounding back to the van after each round, her ponytail flop, flop on her shoulders.

I watched on, the whelps racing and tussling round me on top the rock, never losing sight of me or jumping down. Mighty jump for them that, small souls that they were. They were seven weeks. Not a bad lap of life, when fighting is just play and most the times you're not asleep you're chasing Twat the cat around the yard, and

seven weeks was old enough they'd live on. The first month is the parlous one, while they're still soft to the cold and the cat, and to each other, so that each morning you have to ready yourself for a warmish lump or two trod into the straw by the other little guzzlers. We lost three the first few weeks. You had to be fair solid, being a sheepdog. Or a farmer. Or a furniture-lugger, come to it, carrying fridges about the place all day.

The lugs were taking a break, one of them sat in the van and the other searching about for something. He was looking all round a big cabinet on the path, well blow me, I know I left it someplace here I wonder where, until the girl came over and set him straight, pointing at something on top the cabinet. A mug of tea, seemed like. It must've gone cold for he slurped it straight down, both hands, the knobbly-arsed monkey.

Sal was biting on my finger. I let her, because it didn't smart that much and she needed to train up her teeth. She was the boldest of the whelps, spite of being a female. The others were happy getting a mother-smothering from Jess, but Sal had started to break from that, partial now to following me round instead. Mostly the tickle on my trouser leg would tell me she was there, but sometimes I'd not mark her until I'd kicked her five yards forward and she'd yap on back to me, what you do that for, you big old bastard? She was the biggest of the litter too. The size of my head, fair exact, for when I played with her and put my cheek to the ground, she fit snug against my face, a damp spot of nose on my forehead. And I had a big head. Long thin head, long thin body. Lankenstein, they'd called me, in them days I still went to school, until three years ago when they sided me off. Cheerio, Lankenstein, we'll not be seeing you again, I hope. Too fucking right you won't.

The inside the van had been gutted and their belongings were lined up on the path to the front door. The pups had quit scuffling, their heads up having a watch, same as I was. Five of us in a row, picture-house style, curious over these towns. A person might've looked on us and guessed we were all thinking similar, though they'd be wrong, likely, for I was eyeing the furniture and figuring how much it'd sell on for. A fair pocketful, certain.

The girl let her hair out. A blondie, looked like. The family were all indoors and she was leant up against the side the van talking to a lugger-bugger. A nice chat they were having. He had his arms folded all attentive but I couldn't get a proper sight on him as he had his back-end to me, so all I could see was the great stump of his back. Probably looked much the same both ways round, mind. She touched him on the arm. Then the wind gave a gust and our ten ears pricked up as laughter drufted up the hillside toward us, her laughter. A pearl of a noise, that danced about our heads a moment then spun off over the Moors behind. She must've laughed first, then touched him, and we'd got them wrongways – Sound is Light's clog-footed brother, always lagging behind. What had a lug such as him said that was so funny? I'd never forced a laugh like that from a person, not a girl, certain. Myself, I'd more likely rile folk up, cause them to shout or bluther, than honey-talk them. That was my talent. Maybe that was what he'd been telling her, maybe they could see me up here with the whelps and he was having nine yards of fun out of me. There's a lad lives up there, do you see him? Sam Marsdyke. He's mighty popular round these parts – you won't find a sheep that has a bad word to say on him. Ha, ha, that's a good one, you are funny, Mr Lugger-Bugger. Oh, I don't know about that. Not half so funny as Marsdyke's face, I'm telling you!

She was at it again. Laughing away, what a man you are, let me just steady myself against the van here.

She'd know me before too long. Not me, course, but my history, painted up in all the muckiest colours by some tosspot, gagging to set her against me. A piece of gossip travels fast through a valley. The hills keep it in. It goes from jaw to jaw all the way along till it's common news, true or not. Specially when the valley's full of tosspots, such as this one.

Delton was the worst. That crick of the kitchen curtain each time I passed by their farm at the bottom of the track, on my way to town. She was spying out, brewing her gossip. Never mind we were in as bad shape as them with money, and we should've stuck together, she'd never be warm on us. Specially me. So I knew she

was out for me now, the blatherskite, brooding round the hillside with her cats whipping round her ankles. Just ripe for an introduction to these towns. And the second she spies her chance – that Sam Marsdyke, let me tell you what he does to young girls like you.

Sod that. I'd let them know I wasn't so foul-smelling as Delton had me for. I'd meet them in flesh first, before they met my shadow.