

ROBERT HOGAN

GROUNDCOVER

The Scots and the English who came to this country looked at the skinny trees and sluggish rivers, and in their dourly sentimental way, named their towns Scone, and Dungog, and Gloucester, and Rothbury, and Aberdeen, and pretended they were Home.

And I pretend I am going home as I drive through the folded landscape, past the fields of sheep, over the one-lane bridges and along the dirt roads that are ruining the suspension of my city car.

I haven't seen the new place. Darryl and Jean moved in after I'd gone to Europe, what was it, a year and a half ago? Over the phone he's told me all the improvements he's made, mostly to the garden. They're pretty happy up here. I could never be, but I'm a city boy, a night owl. All this fresh air only makes me sleepy. I need the extra kick of air pollution to get me going in the morning.

The orange dust rises behind me and coats the trees and shrubs by the road. (Now *that's* pollution.) There's no wind, and it's hot, and there are no noises, only the grumbling of the tyres on the gravel.

According to his map the driveway is "just past the turn-off" but knowing Darryl's idea of distance that could be a few kilometres. No doubt I'll be driving around in circles all afternoon. It's something I do rather well.

All my worries are for nothing.

There's a big sign at the entrance, THE CHAPMANS, and balloons, and a smaller sign in pale water-colours: "Welcome Uncle Paul". That'd have to be Dimity's work. If I liked kids she'd be my favourite.

They'll know I'm here from my dust, and sure enough they're all out to greet me. Jean is wiping a strand of hair off her face and wringing her hands on her apron, the Farmer's Wife personified. All we need is for Darryl to appear in overalls holding a pitchfork for the scene to be complete.

He's disappointed me again. He's wearing jeans and a t-shirt, like normal people do. He does everything normal people do, I always have to think about it first. Everyone is all smiles, that's what kids do, after all. The place is great, the garden looks a treat, how are they managing in the drought? No, I'm not tired, not particularly. Driving is wearying, especially on these roads, give me the freeways and side streets of the city any day. Yes, I'd love a coffee, then show me around.

Darryl looks heavier, still muscular, but thick around the middle. Country life agrees with him. They all look heavier, more solid, fleshed out, but that's probably in contrast with myself. Out in the kitchen they're no doubt whispering, "God he looks awful, so thin and tired, hollow." Well, yes, I am that, a hollow man, although my heart is in the right place. I'd love to lie down. I'd love to sleep. The coffee will keep me going.

Now that it's cooler we can tour the garden, Darryl and I. Jean has the kids doing some activity in the house, but she manages to hover near the window, watching us. We start with the vegetable garden, of which he is very proud. He names the rows fondly, and I say things like "Oh wonderful" and try to mean them.

He's very proud of his compost heap too, but manages a laugh when I tell him it's a load of old rubbish. It's a weak joke, and we both tilt our heads and roll our eyes, the way our father used to do. We go around the side of the house to inspect the wattles and the grevilleas. Darryl fancies himself as the local Grevillea king, and I am introduced to each of them by name, this is Robyn Gordon, this is Clearview David, Ned Kelly, Ivanhoe, until I can take it no longer and burst out laughing.

He falls silent for a while, perhaps insulted. Jean has moved to the side window, not visible yet somehow in view behind the sheer curtain. He glances in her direction.

"How are you, Paul?" he says. Don't tell me, I don't want to know, his tone implies.

"I'm well," I say. As can be expected, I don't need to add.

"That's good," he says, relieved. "Over here we put in some Boronia. It's not in flower now, but when it is it's superb. The scent is something marvellous."

"I'll take three," I say. He looks puzzled for a moment, then smiles. "You haven't lost your sarcasm," he says.

"It's wit, Darryl. Wit."

"See this patch here? Under the pines? Nothing would grow there. We planted some of this Lanigera, it's a Grevillea, took off like wildfire. Plenty of water, now it's in great shape. You should see it in the Spring. Flowers for months."

"I'll have to come up in the Spring."

There's a silence after that, but he recovers well. "It's a perfect ground cover. Better than grass, you don't have to cut it every week. You have to be careful, though. It's a fast grower, it'll take over."

"I'll have to plant some. I'll be needing a good ground cover."

He changes the subject quickly, taking me by surprise. "I'll have to take you to see the rock pool," he says, and he leads me around behind the shed and down a narrow path through some tall bamboo. It's hot down here, whatever evening breeze there might have been up at the house hasn't penetrated the thick clumps of bamboo. The tall spears rattle as we move through them, and there is a smell of dust in the air.

"We could use some rain," he calls back. I could use a drink. Or a sleep. The heat gets more oppressive, and I am forced to stop to catch my breath. He has gone a little way ahead before he realises I'm not behind him. By the time he turns back I am flat out on the path, not conscious but not unconscious. The trip back to the house is swift and not uncomfortable. I don't weigh very much any more.

At least they have the sense not to call a doctor. They'd only have to go through the full explanation and I'd be taken away somewhere, the kids would be upset, everyone would be unhappy. Instead of just me.

Little Megan comes and stands next to me, takes my hand and puts her hot little palm on my brow.

"No fever," she tells me seriously. "Cool as a cucumber. You'll be right in the morning." It's Jean speaking through the child, an often repeated, comforting phrase. I smile. This is really why I'm here. She peers closely at my hand, at the brown patch just above my wrist. "What's that? Is it a mole? Daddy has a mole on his back, with two hairs growing out. Me and Fiona pull them out with the tweezers when they get too long. Daddy calls them weeds."

I catch Darryl's eye and he grins and shrugs. Why not? I catch Jean's eye but she looks away. Megan studies the spot on my arm. "You don't have any weeds. Did you pull them out yourself?"

"No," I tell her, "no weeds. It's ground cover. It's a fast grower, you have to be careful or it takes over completely."

"Time for tea, Meggy," Darryl says all at once and lifts her up and away from me. "Uncle Paul will have his later, when he's rested." I'm rested now, I can sit up, I can move about. The children are taken away, to the kitchen to eat. Darryl stands at the door.

"I just have to go water the garden," he says apologetically.

I nod. "The ground cover."

He nods back.

"I'll come with you," I call, and try to rise, but he's already gone.