

Epilogue

Why am I telling you this all now? Because, a month or so ago I saw him. Bracken. At least I'm fairly sure it was him. I was down from London to clear out Dad's house. The death had been quick and therefore as far as deaths go an easy one but clearing out the house was not. Too many memories. Too many unexpressed feelings and moments surfacing. So I'd taken to trying to do it in small bursts. An hour or two at a time, here and there when my legal work allowed. It's stressful running your own firm. Mrs Turner was old but, mercifully, still around and, to be honest, she had done a fair bit of it. But there were still decisions to be made. Decisions that only I could make. What to keep, what to give away, what to chuck for good. That sort of thing.

It was on one of those visits that, for no reason I can divine, I decided to drive up the road that led to where Bracken had lived. On the way I passed a big paddock surrounded by a white wooden post and rail fence. The fence stood out for being well maintained and seemed to belong to *Pretty Thing* pages.indd 241 29/09/2014 12:15 Jennifer Nadel 242 a large Queen Anne house with a quadrangle of brick stables and cottages attached.

It took me a moment to realize that it must have been the very same house I'd once told Bracken I wanted to live in. One of the many grandiose pronouncements I was prone to giving in those days. It was the only house I'd ever seen that was bigger than Pete Mantoni's. Field Hall it was called. On the far side, beyond the stable block, there was now what looked like a huge warehouse complex. Large modern buildings tastefully clad in timber.

A line of lorries was parked outside – seven or eight of them – then three or four vans and a couple of forklifts. It looked like quite some operation. Only as I was nearly past it did I spot the sign. White with a neat black classical typeface: 'S. Bracken Agricultural Supplies'.

I stopped the car a bit further on. I turned the engine off and just sat there. I don't know how long for and I can't say what exactly I was thinking. Afterwards I drove on to the brow of the hill and the row of houses that Bracken and his mum had lived in. They were still much the same except for some new front doors and window boxes. I don't know what I was looking for. Bracken's mum had, I knew, long since gone. Maybe I was just in search of a hint of how things used to be so that my mind could play a bit longer with what might have been.

On the way back I slowed down as I passed Field Hall. A convertible of some sort with its roof down was waiting to pull out of the drive. In the driver's seat, unmistakable despite the passage of all those years, was Bracken. His denim jacket had given way to something made of sheepskin, but his hair *Pretty Thing* pages.indd 242 29/09/2014 12:15 *Pretty Thing* 243 was still black and messy. Beside him was a woman whose features I didn't have time to take in. Sitting at the back of the car where the roof had been folded down were three lanky kids, presumably in their early teens (I find it difficult to age children precisely having never had any myself). They were holding onto the roll bar that rose across the centre of the car. There was no time to take in their faces or even their genders; the only feature I did manage to observe was their hair. All three of them had bright red hair. They were clearly having a good time, laughing and jostling each other. Waiting, no doubt, for the car to get moving so that they could have the thrill of speeding through the countryside with the air whipping around them. I glanced back again at the front seat and saw that the woman beside Bracken had red hair too. A shade not dissimilar although possibly brighter than mine had been all those years ago.

I carried on. In my rear view mirror I watched the car turn out of the driveway and speed up the hill in the opposite direction. What reason did I have to stop? I forgot that I'd promised to drop in on Mrs Turner to discuss the final disposal of my father's small legal library. I forgot also that I'd meant to call at the butchers to pick up some fresh meat to bring back to London. I just kept driving.