

The Rock Farmer

Ron Burrows

EARLY ONE SUNDAY morning, armed with a sledgehammer, a man strode around the back of our house and began laying into the frame of our bungalow. Chips of brick and concrete flew.

I poked my head out of the doona and groaned. ‘The Rock Farmer,’ I said.

My wife lifted her head and said, ‘The what?’

‘The Rock Farmer.’

‘One of the posties from work?’

‘I told him he could have the frame for firewood.’

‘Jesus.’ The word was a soft hiss as she pulled the doona over her head.

I sighed and got out of bed. The whump, whump, whump of the sledgehammer became a march as I walked barefooted down the hall. To the tune of screeching nails being torn from the timbers I yanked back the kitchen curtain and yelled, ‘Hey!’

The Rock Farmer stopped and pushed back a lock of black hair, pulled a handkerchief that crackled as he forced it open, from his pocket, and wiped his brow. He kicked at a piece of brick with a Blundstone boot, saluted me with the sledgehammer, turned and laid into another stud.

If you travel out along the Western Highway you’ll go through Deer Park. Drive on past the display homes and the billboards advertising the new estates and you’ll come to Rockbank. It’s red dirt country where rocks still lay where they bounced after the Mt Cottrell volcano erupted.

In a paddock one optimist has put a big sign out—‘Rocks for Sale’. The convicts ‘arranged’ a lot of rocks in lines and their dry stone walls tell the story of their toil.

You won’t have any trouble finding the Rock Farm. It’s a stone’s throw from Mt Cottrell. Most of the farmers have cleared their paddocks of rocks or at least rearranged them. The Rock Farmer tried. Here and there small cairns decorate the paddocks. A broken-down bulldozer with its tracks hanging off sits near a post-and-rail fence.

Drive in between the rotted fence posts with its gate hanging awry. Never mind the people sitting on the front verandah drinking beer and ogling you. They haven’t paid any rent to the Rock Farmer for months. Keep going. You don’t have to shake your head like that. That really is a full-size replica of Humphrey Bogart’s boat, *African Queen*, bow up, rusting amongst the rocks.

Veer around that boulder in the middle of the track or you’ll put a hole in your sump. Over there the sign on the front of that tram says, ‘St Kilda Beach’. The neighbours were all out when the low-loader dragged it in a year ago. The Rock Farmer has to move it. The council says he should have applied for a permit. He says he’s going to hire a contractor to dig a huge pit.

His brother used to live in that green shipping container. The heat drove him out to look for a tree in the summer and in winter he warmed his blood with whisky.

If you time-travel back forty years you will be able to see what the Rock Farmer was like as a young man. He will be wearing platform shoes and a Hawaiian shirt tied in a knot at his midriff. Catch the time-train from Warsaw to Wroclaw in the Polish Sudeten Highlands. You’ll find him there as soon as you alight. He will be broke. The stationmaster is letting him sleep on a rough, wooden bench on the platform and giving him a feed from time to time.

He is not called the Rock Farmer but that’s the only name we know him by. Dreaming of a better life, he has responded to a ‘lonely-hearts’ advertisement from a young woman who claims to be a princess.

The future Rock Farmer arranges to be at her front door on Tuesday. He will be excited but tired because he has had little sleep for the past twenty-four hours. The Polish Princess will open the door and see her prince for the first time. The prince will take her hand and ask her to marry him. She will tell him that there are other suitors but says she

will give him her decision on Friday. Rain or shine he must continue to live on the station platform until then.

Your time has run out however, you have to come back now. Leave the railway station and the stationmaster to record the rest. Come on. Come back to the Rock Farm. There are more 'exhibits' to inspect. Look, over here . . . Check out this 1949 Vanguard. The Rock Farmer bought this beauty for his fourteen-year-old son. He hoped it might restore their relationship. 'Boy', as he called him, wasn't interested in the car and the grass and thistles have grown up around it. If you put a battery in it you could turn the motor over. It might start without further tinkering. Pump the tyres up and you can take it for a test drive through the rocks. The Rock Farmer won't mind.

There's a skewbald horse wearing his twentieth winter coat coming towards us. You can see he's been rolling in the mud at the edge of the dam. Could that be the same horse that the Rock Farmer bought for the Girl's fourteenth birthday? He still buys lucerne and chaff and fills the bathtub with water once a week.

The Rock Farmer has been living in the green shipping container sleeping beside his brother since the Polish Princess turned him out of their bayside home last year. An untidy man has degenerated into an unkempt one. I'll tell you what happened.

The Polish Princess morphed into a witch after the prince married her. The births of the Boy and two years later, the Girl, were the result of two occasions when the princess allowed the prince into her bed. She cast a spell over her son and gave him an elephant's head. The Girl was a beautiful creature so the Polish Princess mixed up a potion for her to drink and turned her into a frog. They never visit their father at the Rock Farm now.

The gods became enraged and every mean trick was turned against the Polish Princess. There was just one wart on each of her breasts until they inexplicably multiplied and a dripping nose caused a crater in her chin. Her long legs became string beans and her teeth dropped out one by one. She had Botox pumped into her scrawny arse but it expanded and her cheeks bounced around like beach balls when she waddled.

The Rock Farmer was sacked from the post office after the last Christmas party. Until then, the union had been able to staunch the constant attacks from the bosses. On summer's mornings he would sit bare-chested, sorting mail. He had a bucket on the floor beside

him and he would stop to towel himself every fifteen minutes before wringing the sweat into his bucket. There was often an inch or more of sweat to tip out before he went out on his round. Sometimes he didn't bother to empty the bucket, adding to the volume the next morning.

He used to ride around, with all his shirt buttons undone, poking letters into the wrong letterboxes in the wrong streets and shoving big packets into small boxes. His work desk was a shambles. Sometimes he ate pig's trotters while he was sorting. He would cram bundles of mail into his bag and leave behind letters hanging out of pigeonholes. In one or two of the pigeon-less holes fillings would hang out of half-eaten sandwiches.

His boss made an appointment for him to see a doctor after he started riding his bike across Kings Way when the 'Don't Walk' sign was lit. Trucks and cars had to make quick lane changes and on the last occasion he caused a multi-car pileup.

He went into work one morning and shovelled the stuff from his locker into a mailbag. 'The quack said I've got bio polo. Life's not worth living for me,' he told a workmate as he tossed his Walkman and a few sets of broken headphones into the bag.

Would you like to see him again after all these years? Of course you won't recognise him but come along. He's at the bayside house now. The Polish Princess has gone away for a short holiday so he's decided to hang around there until she gets back. You will love the house. It's a Victorian cottage with a high brick fence. Years ago there was a white picket fence but the school kids used to taunt her as she tended her garden. One even poked her with a stick crying, 'Get back' as he advanced.

Because the front and back doors are in line you can see through to the back garden when both doors are open. The two sets of architraves frame a back garden with a—now let me get this right because it's important; you might want to grow one yourself, a narrow leaf gimlet—*Eucalyptus spathulata*—its bronze, shiny trunk in the centre of the lawn, a tree to bear all weights.

The Chinese say that you should never have the front and back doors in line because it is bad Feng Shui; the chi will come in and go straight out again, but in summer when the hot northerlies give way to a southerly all you need to do is open both doors and the hot chi exits.

Don't be shy. Go through the high front gate. The Rock Farmer said he would leave both doors open. You will see him instantly. His

Blundstones will be four inches off the ground with the toecaps pointing downward. A red-and-white football scarf will be tied to a fork in the tree with the other end knotted around his neck. It's probably best if you avert your eyes now, because his face will be black and his tongue will be swollen, hanging out the side of his mouth like a panting dog. His eyes will be tombowlers. He will be staring at you if you do happen to look up, just as he will be looking at the Polish Princess when she walks through the front gate.