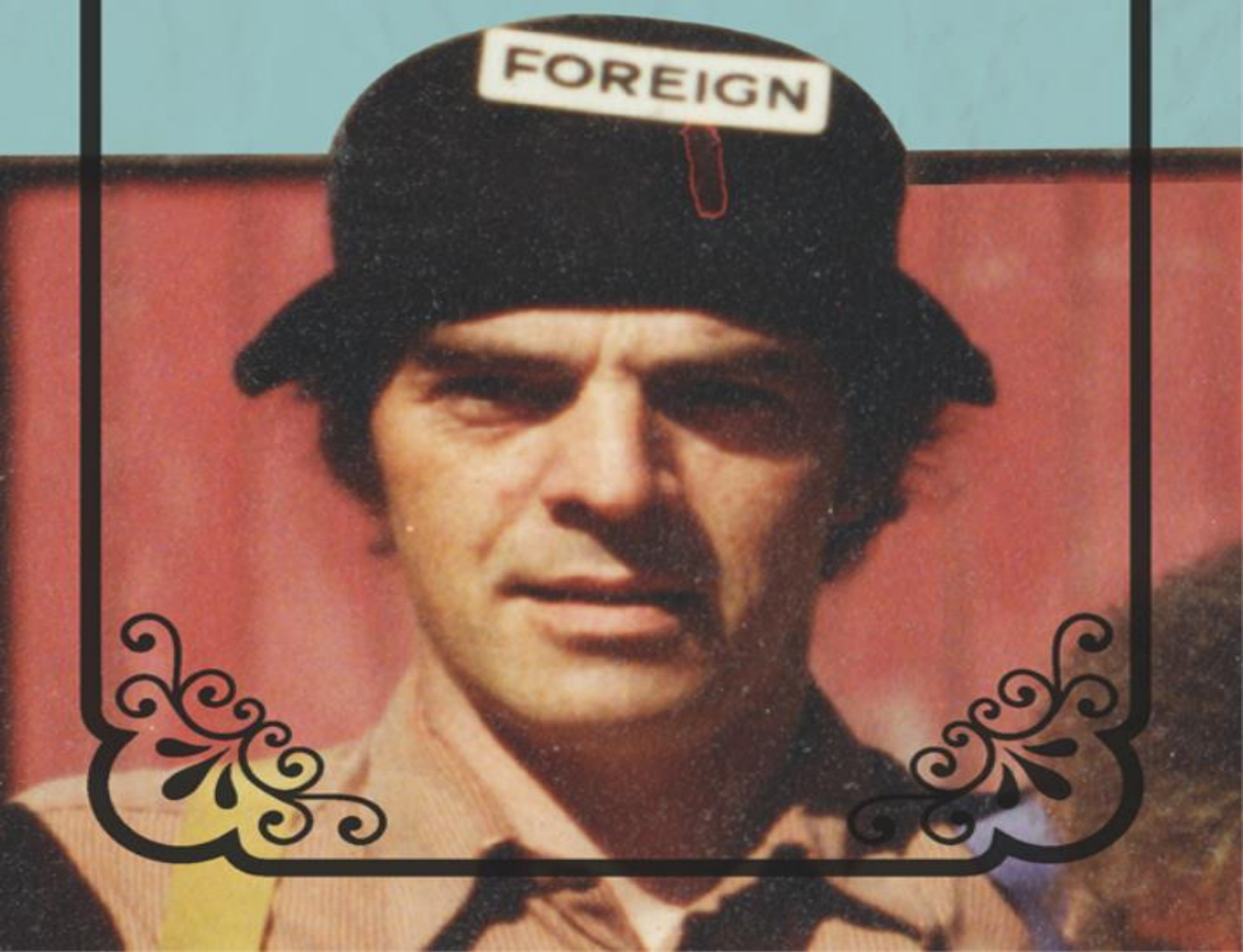


NICK PERRY

THE GREAT PRETENDER

A CATALOGUE OF CHAOS AND CREATIVITY



THE GREAT PRETENDER



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Perry spent his childhood in rural Dorset. He was educated at Parkstone Sea Training School and left at fifteen for a job at ATV in London. He then travelled around Europe for a while and moved from job to job back in London until he came into a small inheritance. On impulse, he and his brother bought a hill farm in North Wales, which is where his first book, *Peaks and Troughs*, takes place. After seven years living on the breadline, he took his family on a new adventure in Greece, the subject of his second book, *Escape to Ikaria*. He now lives with his wife in Wiltshire.

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A CATALOGUE OF CHAOS
AND CREATIVITY

NICK PERRY

Polygon

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Some of the names and locations have been changed. Many of the players in this story are still walking the planet and would wish to remain anonymous.

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*To Mike Townsend, who only once in eighteen years said,
'It's an impissibolity.' (sic)*

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Epilogue

Acknowledgement

It was down in the valley below the village of Frampton Mansell in Gloucestershire, watching the slow, ungainly flight of a heron rising from a flooded meadow on a still September morning, that I decided it was time to get on with it. No more living from hand to mouth and just getting by, I told myself as I stood under the ivy-clad red-brick arches of Brunel's railway viaduct and the sun spread over the hills across the valley. This was it.

So I moved into a 1940s single-storey stable block that housed a solitary Shire horse called Pearl. She was a large grey beast who seemed to enjoy my company, neighing when I arrived every morning with a pocket full of apples and a packet of Polos. The stable block, with its mossy roof and shabby pebbledashed walls, was one of many buildings on what had once been a working farm, Puckmill, close to the Thames Severn Canal that snaked its way through the Golden Valley, passed the Daneway pub and disappeared into the Sapperton tunnel. It was one of these stables, measuring no more than sixteen foot by twelve, that became my workshop, and the place where I began my business. It was owned by Celia Foxton, a friend of many years, who had recently bought the farm.

'Rent it from me if you want, for say sixty pounds a month, including electricity. So long as you can muck out Pearl's stable and give her half a bale of hay every day.'

'I can do that.'

Frampton Mansell is a small village of mellow Cotswold stone cottages on the steep slopes of the Golden Valley. At its centre is the seventeenth-century Crown Inn and a few hundred yards away St Luke's church, built by Lord Bathurst in 1843. The single-track lane that winds steeply down through the village requires patient drivers to find passing places; for those of a certain age suffering stiff necks, reversing can be an arduous task. And at the bottom is Brunel's viaduct, completed the same year as St Luke's. Here, through one of its arches, began the long stony drive to Puckmill's old farmhouse, where Celia lived.

It was 1981; I was thirty-four with four children. Our last, Belah, born three years before, trailed behind Seth who had just turned six, and our twins, Sam and Lysta, with eleven years on the clock. Then there was Ros, my Welsh wife, ahead of us all at thirty-eight.

We'd been a restless family; there was a non-conformity that ran through the bloodline and we had difficulty fitting into everyday life. We were trying to adjust to living next door to neighbours in a street of semi-detached houses in Cirencester after farming for seven years in the Welsh hills, where we had led an isolated life when it came to other people. Then we moved to Ikaria, a Greek island in the Aegean, where I'd worked as a fisherman and a gardener in a remote monastery while Ros taught the children their school work in the garden under eucalyptus trees full of the sound of cicadas. It hadn't exactly been a conventional life.

Till recently, I'd been working at the Brass Rubbing Centre pouring polyester resin into silicone moulds to make do-it-yourself kits for children. My younger brother, Jack, still worked there, having come down from the hills above Capel Curig where he'd been a shepherd for nearly ten years. His wife Corinna, who, unlike Jack, enjoyed being

part of the human race, had heard about the vacancy. I couldn't believe it when Jack took the job, after spending so long wandering alone with Meg, his Border Collie, in the rugged landscapes of North Wales. And as for myself, well, I'd no idea where I was heading at the time, so I joined him in what was no more than a cottage industry.

After just a week and seeing no future in it, I said to him, 'Jack, what's happened to us? Why are we working here?'

'Well, I've got to stick it out for a while. Corinna's pregnant.'

I lasted three months before I handed in my notice, after realising that you could make a mould of whatever you chose, and surely something much more interesting than brass rubbing kits for children. Exactly what I didn't know, but before I left I made a mould of one of our door knobs, only because we needed two, and Ros hadn't been able to find a match. It fitted perfectly, and Ros was astonished that I had shown some DIY skills.

Jack wasn't surprised that I'd had enough even after such a short time.

'What are you going to do?'

'I really don't know. I feel as though I'm not going to fit in anywhere.'

I was never ideal employee material; in fact I was unemployable. Working under someone else who was making the decisions never suited me. At least if things go wrong and you're the boss you've only yourself to blame.

It was an intuitive thing, the beginning of a new phase, a force urging me to follow a different path. I needed to be single-minded, to make money and not be distracted. The biggest obstacle I had to overcome was myself. 'Do not allow your mind to wander' became my new mantra.

And then it came to me, in one of those moments coming out of sleep when images seem to be fading into the daylight and yet are still possible to catch, like a hand plunging into a pond and grabbing a tadpole. Of course – it was obvious. Replicas, that’s what I should be making, but replicas of what?

So I gathered the family around to tell them my plan. I wanted them to know we were entering a new era. I just hoped they’d take me seriously. I had a history of various projects that had ended in failure, such as trying to talk hardened Welsh farmers into becoming organic, or convince the people of Caernarvon that they were ready for a health food shop.

‘It’s the future,’ I had told them.

‘Health food shop? What sort of talk is that, boyo? We’ve got three bloody greengrocers already.’

‘I’ve got something very important to tell you,’ I said now, which I thought would get everyone’s attention. But before I could start, Sam asked me how long we were going to go on living in a house that was too small for us.

‘Yes, Dad,’ Lysta and Seth agreed, wanting to be off, seeking a new adventure in another country.

‘Why can’t we go and live in Egypt?’ said Lysta. I knew immediately why she had put forward that idea. Greg, a Canadian friend we’d met on Ikaria, had travelled there and sent us postcards telling us what a remarkable country it was and suggesting we join him.

Sam couldn’t understand why we didn’t just leave, as we did when we went to Ikaria, and see what happened when we got there. Ros too said she would be quite happy if we upped sticks and went in search of something new. I was facing a rebellion and, completely out of character, found myself trying to talk some practical sense: that once we

had some money in the bank, we could go on our travels again.

‘We’re broke. Why do you think your mother goes to jumble sales every week?’

‘She’d go anyway. She loves them,’ said Lysta dismissively.

‘Listen to me. I have the makings of a new business. We can make a lot of money,’ I told them. ‘We had no money on Ikaria, even though I worked every day, while all of you had a long holiday in the sun.’

When I at last managed to explain my idea, which I’d hoped would be met with some enthusiasm, they grudgingly accepted it, but repeated that living in a semi-detached house in a Cotswold town was not for them, which I well understood.

‘Well, for a while we’ll have to make a few adjustments and fit in with our new surroundings.’ Three years was all I needed, I said, knowing that is a long time in a child’s life, but thinking their dissatisfactions would be forgotten once they’d settled into their new school. Although Ros agreed, in the months that followed it was she who felt the most displaced, and she showed little interest in anything beyond the four walls of our house.

Meanwhile, I became completely absorbed in what could be done with that obnoxious sticky liquid, a refined byproduct of oil – resin. I’d already learnt how to make moulds of little ornaments with silicone rubber. This was done by adding various filler powders and then mixing it to the right consistency. That was the easy part; if it was so simple everyone would be doing it. The hard part was to make the perfect replica.

Silicone is so sensitive it will reproduce every minute mark on any surface: your fingerprints, even the miniature

veins in an oak leaf. The mould will hold this memory for hundreds of castings, using just a few penceworth of resin. That was the sum total of my knowledge. What I needed to discover was how to give the pieces I had in mind the aged look of a centuries-old antique.

In the beginning of a new cycle in one's life, it's uncanny how one can be invisibly nudged in the right direction; how your luck can change. As was illustrated by Dr Harvey, after he'd diagnosed my infected ingrowing toenail and I'd lost the prescription he'd given me for antibiotics. I knew he lived in Victoria Road so went and knocked on his door, hoping he could give me a replacement. He showed me into his sitting room, where I was immediately drawn to a collection of beautifully carved ivories in a glass cabinet, particularly a finely detailed piece of several rats in a cornsack. He told me the carvings were Japanese and called netsukes, and that he'd started collecting them while practising medicine in the Far East. I explained to generous Dr Harvey what I was up to, though I probably went too far when I said the techniques I was developing were going to make me an extremely rich man. He was so intrigued he said I could borrow the rats, on the understanding that they wouldn't be damaged. I'd found the first vital prerequisite for my venture – an exquisite piece to replicate.

I became so obsessed Ros and the children hardly saw me. Of course I always went home for supper; eating together was a ritual we never liked to miss. But then I was out again, driving the twenty minutes to the workshop to continue my experiments. Pearl now knew the odd hours I kept and neighed quite differently in the evenings, constantly scraping her hoof, knowing another snack was on its way. I always fed her, whatever time I turned up, and

spent a few minutes with her. I don't know why I felt it necessary to tell her what I was up to; maybe it concerned me that she must be bored, leaning out of the stable half-door, with only the trains passing on the viaduct to break the monotony of her solitary night life.

To make instant antiques, I needed some sort of stain, which I was certain you couldn't buy off the shelf because it didn't exist. There was no alternative: I would have to find the secret formula through trial and error. As I fed Pearl an apple and stroked her neck, I heard myself thinking out loud, 'I have to become an alchemist.'

During those night hours working alone I wondered whether I was pursuing delusional dreams, losing my foothold in reality. Well, you would, spending so long alone beneath a single fluorescent tube that attracted an array of dancing insects, as if in a strange solitary confinement.

Things changed when Ros asked me to go to the chemist to get some cough medicine for Lysta; hardly the place you would have imagined for an illuminating meeting, but it was Walter Pepper, the pharmacist, who showed me the path. I happened to mention to him in passing what I was up to and that probably a chemist would have the answer.

He was a thin, pale man in his mid-sixties with a somewhat ghostly look, his hair the colour of an early morning cloud that the light passed through. However, there was a keen look in his eye that showed he was more than just a man in a white coat standing behind the counter. I also had a strange sensation that we'd met before and he was coming back into my life.

Of course, I exaggerated the importance of my endeavours. I'd heard that one should never undersell oneself so I told him I was in search of the Holy Grail, but it was all hush-hush for commercial reasons. This raised his

eyebrows and curiosity enough to ask me what it was that I needed to find out.

‘I’m trying to make instant antiques. Replicas, to be precise,’ I whispered, to give it more emphasis.

He closed the shop at six o’clock, and over a cup of tea in a quiet little café in Black Jack Street I revealed my plan. And the more he heard, the more interested and excited he became. When Doreen, the café owner, who obviously knew Walter, came and told us it was closing time, he bribed her to let us stay another half hour by buying a couple of slices of her chocolate gateau.

‘I cannot begin to tell you how much this means to me. As a young man I was fascinated by patinations to be put on to decorative arts. I wanted to work in a bronze foundry, but my father wouldn’t have it.’

‘We were meant to meet,’ I said. ‘But how do you think you can help me?’

‘I know the periodic table and many chemical formulas.’

‘That sounds good, but I don’t know what it means.’

And I wouldn’t, not that evening, as Doreen was impatiently ushering us towards the door.

‘Walter,’ she said, ‘I don’t think I’ve ever heard you talk so much, and for so long.’

‘That makes two of us,’ he said, smiling.

We parted, and as I walked home I was convinced that with Walter’s knowledge and my enthusiasm there was a chance I had the makings of a real business. That evening after the children had gone to bed I said to Ros, ‘Isn’t it strange how three little mundane things can alter your life?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘An ingrowing toenail, a lost prescription, and Lysta needing some cough medicine.’

A week later, as I lay in bed with Ros, the telephone rang.

'It must be something serious for someone to be ringing at this time of night. You'd better go and answer it.'

Which I did, and listened to the quiet tones of Walter Pepper speaking softly into the mouthpiece, as if he didn't want to be overheard. He sounded like a spy in a John le Carré novel, calling in with some vital information.

'Can you get hold of a fish kettle?' he asked. I thought he was speaking in code. No one had ever said that to me before.

'Did you say a fish kettle?' I whispered back.

'That is you, Mr Perry?'

'Yes, but call me Nick.'

'Can you get hold of a fish kettle?'

'I don't know.'

'Well, we need one. I have the answer.'

Then he put the phone down, so I went back to bed where Ros was anxiously waiting to hear who had called.

'Walter Pepper wants a fish kettle. He says he knows how to turn my netsukes into instant antiques.'

Two days later I managed to find one in *Exchange and Mart*, on the Isle of Skye of all places. An old lady called Mrs MacGrogan living in a crofter's cottage had cooked her salmon in it for over thirty years. We settled on eighteen pounds, cheaper than the postage to get it delivered to me. It looked like a large oval aluminium saucepan with a lid. I carried it round to Walter's Georgian house in Dollar Street and down into the basement. He was listening to Eric Clapton's 'Layla', eager and excited, wearing a rubber apron and Marigold gloves, saying we must thank Timothy Cook's verruca for his amazing discovery. Apparently, Timothy's mother had asked for something to deal with the

ugly growth that had suddenly appeared on the underside of her son's large toe, and this was the result. 'To Timothy Cook's verruca,' I said, pretending to raise a glass.

Walter held up a sachet of purple crystals under the bare light bulb and slowly emptied the contents into the fish kettle. He'd been heating up a large container of water on an old oven and kept checking the temperature until it reached precisely twenty-five degrees, when he poured it carefully over the potassium permanganate, which he told me was the chemical name of the crystals.

I passed him the dozen casts I'd made of the delicate cornsack. One at a time he submerged them into the steaming dark liquid. This was an incredible moment of anticipation, the hope of a breakthrough so exciting me that I began to sweat, a side effect of some psychological state I had not experienced before. Walter slowly counted down the seconds on his wristwatch. At the precise moment he reached zero, he sank his hand into the fish kettle and then held out in front of me the first cornsack, covered in a light brown coating similar in colour to the original. I gasped.

'Perfect!'

But Walter wasn't completely satisfied, and proceeded to take out the remaining pieces at carefully timed intervals. Each one had a slightly different depth of colour.

'I think the finish is too even,' he said. 'They don't have the worn look of objects that have been handled thousands of times over the past two hundred years.'

'You're quite right,' I said, although I doubted whether anyone else would have spotted it.

But Walter was insistent, convinced that if we put them next to the original there was a subtle difference that an expert's discerning eye would detect.

‘This one’s pretty close, though I think it needs to go through another process. But it’s been a good night’s work.’

‘Let me take it with me. I have more things to do.’

‘Don’t pick it up with your bare hands. It will stain your fingers like nicotine. People will think you’re a heavy smoker.’

That night Walter became a friend. I hadn’t expected him to be so interested in what I was up to, but when we went and had a drink in the Oddfellows in Chester Street it became obvious how lonely he was, and that what I was pursuing could fill some of the empty hours in his life. It led to the inevitable question of money, which we delicately danced around for a few minutes before he asked me if I needed an investment, something that hadn’t entered my head.

‘How much do you want?’ he asked.

‘Not a lot . . . in fact nothing at all,’ I said uncertainly.

‘Well, you can’t build a business without any capital,’ he said, sipping his ginger beer; he didn’t indulge in alcohol. ‘I want to help you get started. I have nothing else going on nowadays, not since my wife died.’

‘You know so much you could certainly help me, but I can’t afford to pay you, not at this stage.’

‘There’s something about you. Maybe it’s your infectious enthusiasm, but I do feel I could be of use,’ he said, giving me an open, receptive look, free of cynicism. He could easily have had doubts; I had no experience, just the energetic drive of a young man, and we were opposites in so many ways. Walter had lived a conventional life and was coming to the end of a successful career.

‘You know, I’d have thought you’d be a classical man, someone who liked Mozart, not Eric Clapton.’

‘You’re right, but it’s never too late to be surprised by yourself. It’s a new beginning, and I’m excited about the journey we’re embarking on.’

‘Let’s meet next week and come to an agreement on how we can work together,’ I said.

The next day I collected the fish kettle from him, bought two jars of potassium permanganate and went back to the workshop to perfect the finish I needed for my rats in a cornsack. Pearl gave me welcoming neighs, leaning over her stable door, as if she had become genuinely interested in my experiments. I had a bag of apples and every time I took a break I gave her one, and usually a couple of Polos as well. As I stood back contemplating the esoteric world I had entered, she chewed on her mints, grinding them down between her teeth. How she could make such a meal out of a single Polo always amused me.

I was realising that nothing gained ever comes easily and all knowledge has to be fought for. Around me on my workbench were tins of waxes, different gauges of wire wool, bottles of acetone and thinners for the stains I was playing around with. Unfortunately, I completely forgot to slip on the Marigolds before putting my bare hand into the permanganate. It looked as if half my arm had been up a cow’s backside and it was impossible to remove this embarrassing stain; too late, I remembered that Walter had warned me to always wear a pair of gloves. Only after three days of continual washing in hot soapy water did the colour gradually begin to fade. Ros found it revolting and so did the children when we sat down to supper.

‘Dad, can’t you wear a glove when we’re eating? You’re putting me off my food,’ Lysta said.

‘Being an alchemist has its drawbacks,’ I said. ‘There’s always a price to pay in pursuit of the ultimate goal.’

‘What is the ultimate goal?’ asked Sam.

‘Success and money. Things we all need. Remember, I’m not doing it just for me, but for all of us.’

This was met with a general scepticism by my family. Ros gave me a mild reassuring smile, or maybe it was a look from someone resigned to the fact that what I was involved in would have to run its course.

Ros told me Sundays had to be a family day after I’d suggested that Sam could help me by mixing up the resin using a Black and Decker drill which I’d adapted with a special propeller. It was a long job and I said I would double his pocket money, because I knew he was saving up to buy a bicycle, some flashy thing with drop handlebars. But Ros insisted I took one day off a week. I reminded her that when we were farming in North Wales I had worked seven days a week.

‘But you’re not farming now.’

So I conceded, knowing she was right: Belah wanted help assembling some furniture for her doll’s house; Seth was keen on cricket and I’d promised him some bowling practice. Lysta was at that age when girls like to stay with each other on a Saturday night and why should Ros always be the one to go and pick her up on a Sunday morning, while Sam was keen that I go and watch him playing football for the Cirencester Under Twelves. And then there was Ros, who never complained that I might be neglecting her. It was when she said ‘We never seem to have time for ourselves’ that I realised I’d got completely wrapped up in my obsession to the exclusion of everything else. Of course I had to take Sundays off. So they became sacrosanct, and difficult as it was to turn my brain off, we spent them together as a family.

But on Mondays I was out of bed at six, creeping downstairs, leaving Ros sleeping. In my search to track down the hidden secrets of those old crafts, I spent a lot of time in the library, my head buried in the pages of master craftsmen who had perfected their art in cold sheds without the comforts of the modern world. It was here, in a book on old English furniture, that I came across rottenstone, a fine limestone powder used as a polish. The words leapt off the page; this was exactly what I was looking for, the missing ingredient, and I knew I had to get some.

Walter was familiar with rottenstone and agreed to buy a bag of it, believing it could provide the answer. It's a grey dust, so fine that with just the slightest breath it floats into the air. Applying it with delicate strokes of a half-inch paintbrush over the rats in a cornsack, I was amazed to see their glossiness immediately disappearing, giving them the perfect, aged look they had been lacking. It was impossible to tell the difference between the replica and the original piece: we had done it!

The first thing I did was produce my replica at the supper table, placing it next to the original in front of the whole family.

'Which is the oldest?' I asked them. 'And which one was made five minutes ago?'

There was complete silence. 'Can we pick them up?' asked Sam.

'You can do what you like with them.'

Ros genuinely couldn't tell them apart. 'It's quite remarkable,' she said.

'Which one is it, Dad?' asked Lysta.

'Do you know, I don't think I can tell myself.'

‘Does it mean we’re going to make a lot of money?’ was what Sam wanted to know.

‘Yes, and more than that, it means when we have saved enough we can travel the world.’

‘Is it still going to take three years?’ asked Seth rather glumly.

‘I’m afraid so, but it will pass quickly if you don’t think about it.’

Over the next four months I built up a range of Japanese carvings, all of them from Dr Harvey’s collection. He was so impressed by the quality of the work, he couldn’t tell the difference either. And I didn’t have to pay him. He was happy to have three replicas in exchange for lending me the originals.

The journey really had begun, and now I was ready to find out if there was a market for my netsukes. I’d worked out all my costings, and if I could make a profit of five pounds on each one, then I had the makings of a viable business.

At last the time had arrived. I'd worked incessantly, and having taken only Christmas Day off now had enough product to sell at the Birmingham rag market. I'd already driven up there to take a look; it was a weekly market held every Monday where people sold furniture, jewellery, old postcards, second-hand clothes, military memorabilia . . . you name it, you could find it there, mostly on the stalls of traders who had come down from the north.

Despite my telling her it wasn't necessary, Ros got up to see me off at five o'clock on a freezing January morning. I hadn't slept for much of the night, revved up, nervous and excited. Then there was the cold fear that the day would bring total failure, that all the work I'd done was the result of an incredible self-deception, and today life would slap me in the face and teach me the hard lesson that I was nothing but a fool.

Ros gave me a thermos of coffee, and as we hugged on the doorstep I could feel in her embrace a kind of tense hope, a will, that after all the effort we would succeed.

The car wouldn't start, even though I had the choke out, and as I kept turning the ignition the battery began to fade and eventually died. I said to Ros I'd give it one more go, although I'd probably already flooded the engine. That last try failed too and I realised we were doomed. I was not going to Birmingham today. Ros was still standing on the doorstep in her dressing gown, shivering.

'We could bump-start it,' she said.

‘What, the two of us?’

Then, with defeat staring us in the face, who should come purring round the corner but Ben Warriner, happily whistling in his electric milk float, bottles clinking. Ros joined him at the back of the car and together they pushed the Fiat down Chester Street. The old girl finally fired up, and with my foot flat to the boards I sped off in a great surge into the starlit night. I shouldn’t have beeped the horn, not at that time in the morning, but I wanted to thank Ros and Ben while I could still see them waving in the rear-view mirror.

The motorway was quiet, just lorries in the slow lane, so I kept my foot on the throttle and, with the Fiat needing a good run, did a steady eighty mph. I got to the market ten minutes early, despite the delayed start, and queued up behind Ford Transits and estate cars pulling trailers, all piled high with furniture precariously tied on to roof racks. No one was out on the frosty pavement wheeler-dealing. Everyone sat in their cars with the windows slightly open, having an early cigarette, exuding blue tobacco smoke into the cold morning air.

Inside, I set up the table for my stall and draped a purple curtain over it, the very one that used to hang in my grandmother’s bedroom. Next I placed a wooden tiered display stand in the centre, a professional touch to show off the netsukes to their full effect. Then I just waited in the vast, freezing building; a bare, forbidding place without any heating. To get any warmth into it would be impossible. It was a harsh environment to do any business in, let alone to put a hand in your pocket and pull out some cash. I didn’t know what to expect; all I felt was what the hell am I doing here?

For the first few minutes I just stood there rubbing my hands together, stamping my feet, trying to keep my blood pumping. Who on earth would want to come out at this time of day? Surely no one was that hungry to make a pound.

But I was wrong. When the great steel shutters rolled up at least a couple of dozen hardy types appeared, moving with purpose. They were all dressed as if they were going out for a day in Siberia, wearing bearskin hats, balaclavas, thick heavy coats, and scarves wrapped several times around their necks. Some wore great fur boots like those worn by trappers out in the Canadian Rockies, and all of them walked with a heavy, purposeful tread, sniffing out a bargain.

The need to wheel and deal cannot be suppressed; it's in the blood and drives you on. The inner satisfaction that rushes through you when you've bought something for a pound and know you can sell it for two. That's what everyone was chasing as they pored over the stalls, picking up what interested them, holding it up in the fluorescent light to examine it with a beady eye before coming up with an offer. And then the cold smirk when they heard the asking price, which no one ever paid but haggled over instead, some seriously, others in a light-hearted fashion. We all have our individual ways of conducting a business transaction, but everyone seeks the same result: to make a profit.

The downtrodden were there as well, coming in from sleeping rough, searching out the tea trolley, hoping for a warming cup of soup. What a diverse bunch walked past my stall that first morning, most of them without two pennies to rub together. Lonely souls wanting to engage me in chat, many with their stories, some speaking of their

❧ Epilogue ❧

In the months that followed, I pinned our last hopes of survival on the success of 'Night Hawks', the range of lamps that was going to become fashionable and appear in all the Sunday supplement magazines. But it wasn't to be; although several lighting shops and interior designers placed orders and I waited by the telephone to hear about the tremendous response they had received, the calls never came. And no wonder, when I heard how much profit margin the retailers had put on, buying them for £95 and charging £225, which was far too expensive for most people. So they trickled out into a few sitting rooms and never did set the world alight.

As soon as planning permission was granted on the barn, I knew it was just a matter of time until I sold the place. Even if I'd got an overdraft set against the property, it would only have prolonged what could not be avoided. Over a few pints of 6X at the Crown on a showery evening with the rain sweeping in across the Golden Valley, I told Mike, Rob, Ade and Quentin that I was done with treading water and was going to close down Puckmill Studios. It was a relief to say it and they all knew it was coming. We raised our glasses and said to each other, 'The end of a little journey in our lives.'

There are too many people to mention who came and went in the years we worked underneath the arches of Brunel's viaduct; this book has only included those who played a significant part. It would take another volume to

mention everyone, so to those of you who came into my life during the Puckmill years and haven't made it to the printed page, I'm sorry.

Mike was with me until the very end, when we sold the last piece of equipment and padlocked the workshop. I eventually sold Puckmill to a property developer and made a profit of £7,000, having bought it from Celia Foxton for £18,000. It gave me a financial buffer, after I'd paid off all the outstanding creditors.

Mike and I still keep in touch, speaking to one another every week. He lives in the same house as he did with his parents, and is now doing back-breaking work building dry-stone walls around Gloucestershire. For a time Rob sold Bohemian art glass from the front room of his house in Malmesbury, while Quentin still has his shop selling antique tins in Bath. Ade learnt to drive a tractor and got a job on Rex Horton's dairy farm. Nothing ever came of his first love, Darina, but he's now married to a girl from the village. Daphne Neville still totters on down at Baker's Mill.

Walter Pepper never returned from South Africa, and my dear mother died in 2012. The last time I saw Peter, her gentleman friend, was at her funeral.

My children all have families of their own, except Belah who lives with her mother, and although Ros and I drifted apart, our friendship is strong to this day and we often laugh at the life we lived together and the risks we took without thinking of the consequences.

From time to time I return to Frampton Mansell. A Cotswold-stone house now stands in place of the barn at Puckmill. Little else has changed beneath the village, where you can follow the footpath down to the canal and take a beautiful walk to the Daneway pub below Sapperton village.

Do I miss any of it? No, and when I look back on those years what stands out are the conditions we worked in, the gruelling months of those hard winters. How we managed to produce such works of art astonishes me.

It was the characters I met that so enriched my life at that time, all of them living on their wits, individuals who came up with the most ingenious ways to put a bundle of hard-earned cash into their pockets. They are from a bygone era, for with everything now available on the internet who needs to be out at five o'clock on a freezing cold morning when you can find what you're looking for on a computer without leaving your bedroom?

Aileen kept in touch for a few years, and within six months of my leaving the rag market she told me Frank had died of a heart attack. The last time we spoke she let me know that Sifta was still zipping around the place, just one deal away from making his stash. That's what he believed, but in truth if removed from that world I doubt he would have survived. He lived on his adrenaline rush, all seven stone of him.

Marcus Wesley now makes his living selling second-hand cars in Bath. I bought one from him only six months ago. Derek Tindall retired to the countryside in Hampshire, and I'm led to believe Archie is still talking his way across America.

When Aileen told me to beware of cheap Chinese imports I had no idea how they would affect a little business hidden under a viaduct beneath a sleepy village in Gloucestershire, never mind that in the years that followed they would flood the whole world. It is now only in secluded pockets of England that you'll find craftsmen practising their skills in hidden sheds, preferably by a quiet river, away from the mainstream of life.

As for Full Quiver, he had one more night of glory, winning a handicap at Nottingham. When Barbara said his racing days were over, the stable girl who'd always looked after him took him to live out his remaining years in Cornwall. What a horse, and what an unforgettable night that was in Windsor.