Family Dinner

by Fishpaste

Summary

Tristan hardly ever goes to see Mother. There may be a reason for that.

Someone at the door? Sounded like it. James hoped Mrs Hall would be able to answer; he currently had his arms full of golden retriever puppies trying to avoid their inoculations. The two children who’d brought them by weren’t much help. He finally caught the last puppy by the scruff and deftly injected it in the hind leg. Ignoring the shrill barks of protest he then helped gather up the three rambunctious creatures and deposit them in the large wicker basket they’d arrived in. The noisy youngsters all left together, leaving a blissfully quiet surgery behind them. James turned to find Mrs Hall standing in the doorway.

“Mr Herriot, visitor for Mr Farnon. I’ve put him in the living room for now.”

“Right, well, Siegfried’s still out on his visits. I don’t suppose you know where Tristan’s hiding?”

“I’d wager I could lay a guess.”

“Drover’s then. Right. Who is it anyway?” He asked as he switched his white coat for his jacket. Thank goodness afternoon surgery was over now.

“It’s a Mr Farnon, a relative I think.”

“Oh, right. I’ll go see to him then. Is Helen about?”

“She’s in there with him now.”

“Excellent.”

He strode quickly down the hall and pushed open the living room door. Helen was there, smiling politely at the tall, rather overweight man by the fire. He was blond, as all the Farnon’s seemed to
be, with a rather florid face and elaborate clothing. One look at his smooth hands convinced James that this particular Farnon was definitely not a vet, or any sort of labourer. He stepped forward to introduce himself.

“Hello, Mr Farnon? I’m James Herriot, you’ve met my wife, Helen?”

“Ah, good afternoon Mr Herriot! I’ve heard a lot about you!”

“Oh really? Anything good?”

“Everything good, let me assure you! Siegfried speaks highly of you as both as a vet and as a person.” The senior Farnon’s voice was mellow and expansive and he had a habit of gesturing while he spoke.

“That’s very kind of him. Would it be impolite to ask…”

“Oh, do forgive me Mr Herriot, I’m Siegfried and Tristan’s uncle, just happened to be in the area, thought I’d pop in and see how they were!”

“Oh, call me James, please.”

“Then you must call me Richard.” He laughed loudly at the brief look of surprise. “Yes, poor Siegfried and his brother ended up with the more exotic names, I assure you, the rest of the family’s aren’t nearly as inventive!”

“Siegfried always said his father was a great fan of Wagner.” Helen said.

“Yes, that would be my brother, Robert.” Mrs Hall came in with tea and biscuits and Helen poured for the gathering.

“Well Mr Farnon…”

“Richard, please!”

“Richard then,” James continued, “I’m sure Siegfried will be back from his rounds before too long. Can we invite you to dinner?”

“Oh that would be delightful, thank you very much.”

“I’ll just tell Mrs Hall.” Helen murmured and headed off.

“Siegfried still out working then?”

“‘Fraid so.”

“Wonderful that boy, he’s shows such dedication to his work! Up and about at all hours and never a word of complaint from him. Well, we all knew he’d go far and look at him now, running a successful practice in Darrowby!”

“He does work very hard, no one could deny that!”

“Yes. I really am very proud of that lad. I practically raised him you know?”

“Oh?”

“Yes, their father died in the war. Their mother came to stay with me, couldn’t cope with grief and the baby.”
“Tristan?”

“Yes, he would have been about two or three. Siegfried was sixteen then though, and already showing such promise! Simply soaked up knowledge like a sponge.”

Helen came back in just then, followed by Siegfried who must have just come back. Richard jumped to his feet to clasp his nephew by the hand.

“Siegfried! How have you been my boy?”

“Uncle Richard! I wasn’t expecting to see you here!”

“I was passing by, couldn’t come through Darrowby without dropping by now, could I?”

“You simply must stay for dinner Richard.”

“Oh, I’ve already been asked!”

“And you accepted? Marvellous! James, you’re on call outs aren’t you? Wonderful.” Siegfried sat back on the sofa and Helen passed him a cup of tea.

“Yes, I’ve just been telling James here, we always knew you’d make it Siegfried. Your practice is coming along wonderfully!”

“Well, I was always determined to become a vet.”

“Why did you become a vet Siegfried?” James asked. “I don’t think you’ve ever told me.”

“Oh, it’s not a very interesting story James. Father was a doctor so I always had the interest in medicine and science. I just preferred working with horses to humans!”

“Of course!” James laughed.

“Best horseman I’ve ever known.” Richard put in. “He’s been riding since almost before he could walk, haven’t you Siegfried?”

“Heavens, I can’t remember! I was much too young!”

“I do! Showed no fear of the horses, none at all. Just walked straight up to the pony, climbed on and away he went! Never seen anything like it.”

“Now I’m sure you’re exaggerating Uncle!”

“Nonsense! You were fantastic with animals, right from the start.”

“So that’s why you became a vet,” Helen put in, “What about Tristan?”

“Tristan?” Siegfried looked momentarily surprised and frowned. “You know, I don’t really know why he chose to be a vet.”

“Nor do I!” Richard said, “He’s never shown much interest in all the work involved that’s for sure!”

“We’ll have to ask him when he comes in.” Helen decided. “Where is he anyway?”

“At some pub or the other, if I know my younger nephew.” Richard put in. James laughed.
“Yes, he is at the Drover’s I believe.”

“It doesn’t surprise me. No self-control that one. That’s his problem!” Richard said, his tone rather hard. James blinked but the awkward moment was broken up as Mrs Hall began bringing in the dinner things. Helen leapt up to help her just as the front door opened again and Tristan could be heard whistling tunelessly as he wandered in. He came through the door.

“Evening all-oh. Ah, Uncle Richard.” There was a sudden subtle tension in the room James noticed. Helen and Mrs Hall seemed oblivious to it thankfully but Siegfried was looking ever so slightly tense and Richard and Tristan were staring at one another. The moment passed as the dinner was served up and they all moved to sit around the table.

After grace had been said and they had all started eating, Richard turned to Tristan.

“So where have you been all day boy while Siegfried’s been out working?”

“Oh, er, well, I had morning surgery and a few calls this afternoon. Couple of sick pigs, that sort of thing.” The blond answered.

“Oh, I see. Not been busy propping up a bar somewhere then?”

“Well, I might have stopped for a couple of pints. Nothing too excessive.”

“I see.” Helen was looking between the two now, James hurried to find a distraction.

“Didn’t you have that mysteriously ill calf to deal with Siegfried? Find out what the problem was?”

“Yes! It was lead poisoning, would you believe it?”

“But we checked everywhere!” James cried, “There was no sign of lead anywhere!”

“No but it turns out that little boy, what was his name, Timothy, likes sailing his boat in the trough in the barn. Boat was painted with lead paint!”

“Oh well done for figuring that out!” Siegfried looked pleased with himself, especially when Richard cut in.

“Of course he figured it out, finest vet in Yorkshire isn’t he? And intelligent to boot! You could stand to learn a lot from him Tristan!”

“Oh, I’m sure.” Tristan didn’t look up. Helen and James exchanged glances.

“Tristan,” Helen started, “We were just discussing earlier, why did you chose to become a vet?”

Tristan frowned thoughtfully, fork playing with his vegetables.

“You know, I don’t really know. Never really thought about being anything else.” He grinned at Helen, “I can see myself as a famous actor though! Tristan Farnon, up on stage! All the lovely women swooning after me!” Richard and Siegfried snorted simultaneously. “Yes well, perhaps not. I must say, this duck is marvellous.”

“Mmm.” Siegfried agreed. “A thank you present from Mr Livingston, who owns that poultry farm out on Cinder’s way.”

“I do love country food.” Richard said cheerfully. “It’s never the same in town.”

“You don’t live in the countryside yourself?” Helen asked.
“Well I do, but I seem to spend much of my time in the city mostly. I work as an agent for one of the banks in Manchester.”

“Oh really, sounds interesting.”

“Oh no, simply lots of maths and diplomacy, working out here on the real problems of the world, now that’s a job to be proud of, right Siegfried?”

“Oh, absolutely! I wouldn’t have it any other way!” The older Farnon brother agreed.

“Mmmm. It’s a good job too. If you’re prepared to put the work into it. Isn’t that right Tristan?” Richard went on.

“Oh, yes.”

“No time for idle layabouts working as a vet!”

“Very true.” Siegfried said, passing James the gravy.

“No time for drunkards either!” Richard said, still staring at Tristan, who was remaining silent, eyes on his meal. James felt the tension building up again; Helen seemed to notice it too.

“I think Tris will be a fine vet! The customers love him!” She said. Tristan shot her a grateful glance.

“Yes, well. There’s more to being a vet than a pleasant manner! That’s for sure!” Richard boomed. Siegfried was looking rather uncomfortable now.

“More wine, Uncle?” He said.

“Don’t mind if I do, thank you very much! Excellent vintage here Siegfried!”

“Yes, I’ve been saving it for an occasion like this.”

“Most generous of you! You’ve always been generous though haven’t you? Must have been a saint though, taking your brother in like that.”

“Yes, well…”

“He’d only just bought the practise,” Richard said directly to James, “Struggling with all the usual problems of starting up and he offered to have Tristan up to live with him so I could spend more time in Manchester. I can’t deny it was a relief, but I always wondered how he managed. That boy’s been getting into trouble since before he could walk.”

“Well…” James really wasn’t sure what to say. The meal was getting more uncomfortable by the minute. Helen was looking wide eyed between the three family members, Tristan had gone pale and quiet and Siegfried was looking more and more unhappy by the second.

“I hear he still hasn’t passed his exams either. Doesn’t surprise me. Siegfried got all the brains there! All the determination to. What are your plans Tristan? Just going to join the practice your brother’s built up from the ground floor? Well, not as though you’d have the guts to start up your own. Well? Answer me lad!”

“Right. Yes. Probably not.” Tristan said quietly.

“Thought not. God, he was a useless child. Never did what he was told, always in trouble.
Nothing like his brother. Never seen two siblings more different, Tristan was a real changling child. I’m just glad my poor brother didn’t have to see what a disappointment his youngest turned out to be!”

“Now steady on!” James cried.

“No, no, no. Don’t try and defend him James. He’d never do the same for you. No notion of loyalty or honour in him at all. No backbone at all in fact! Not a word in your own defence Tristan then?”

“Would it make any difference if I did?”

“And the sarcasm of course. Lowest form of wit there Tristan. I know you’re not as intelligent as your brother but you could refrain from using the more vulgar forms of humour I’m sure we’d all be deeply grateful. Heavens boy, I’ve no idea how you can manage to function in polite company. Have you learned no manners? You should try and be more like your brother! Now there’s a fellow who has no problem fitting into the higher societies. You’d probably walk mud onto the carpets and ask for a pint wouldn’t you?”

The atmosphere around the table was tense and angry. Tristan was making no move to defend himself against what his Uncle was saying. James couldn’t believe the rubbish the man was spouting; he felt he was in a state of shock, or perhaps a nightmare. Richard had seemed such a nice old stick earlier, what was with this unreasonable dislike of Tristan? He seemed to have no problem with Siegfried, was happy to sing his praises to the moon and back, but, like the ewe that rejected one lamb and not the other, saw nothing but flaws in Tristan. Helen was looking angry now, manners or no manners she wouldn’t be able to hold back much longer. James didn’t think his own temper could last much more of these ridiculous falsehoods Richard kept coming out with. And he still wasn’t finished it seemed.

“An idle, drunken layabout. Wasting your brother’s hard earned money on drink and women no doubt. Skirt chasing has always been a hobby of yours hasn’t it Tristan. Not quite good enough for a real relationship so you resort to panting after anything in a dress with your tongue hanging out! And another thing…”

But before Richard could expound on whatever this other thing was the phone rang shrilly from the hall. James, aware he was technically on call out, leapt up to answer it, before realising it might have been kinder to let Tris get it. He grimaced apologetically at his friend as he went out to the hall.

“Darrowby eight five?”

“Oh, is that the vet?”

“This is James Herriot, veterinary speaking.”

“Good. I’ve a pig with a torn ear up on Skowburrow farm. Would ye mind coming fer a look? It’s nowt too bad but we’ve had a fair bit of lockjaw here before. Do ye have an injection or summin for her?”

“Of course, I’ll be up right away.”

“Oh, there’s no rush. Stopped bleeding by now.”

“I’d be happy to come up immediately, don’t worry about it.”

“Well, thank ye kindly then.”
James hung up thoughtfully. Giving a pig a quick tetanus shot was certainly not the most urgent of jobs and it definitely only needed one man. He went back into the living room. The table was silent now. Tristan had gone very pale indeed and wasn’t looking up from his plate. He wasn’t eating either, just shifting food around. Helen watched him anxiously, she hadn’t eaten much either. Siegfried was topping up Richard’s glass of wine, an effort to distract him from his brother it seemed. Richard had cleared his plate and seemed perfectly content, unaware of the anger and resentment roiling off Helen, James and Siegfried. James cleared his throat.

“I’ve got a call out to Skowburrow farm, I’m heading off now.”

“Very good James.” Siegfried said absently.

“I could do with an extra pair of hands though, can you spare Tristan?” Now Tris looked up, eyes bright with sudden hope. They darkened when Richard spoke again.

“What? Take him for help? I wouldn’t recommend it James; he’ll be nothing but a hindrance!”

“Well I disagree.” James said tightly. “Tristan is already a very fine vet indeed. I’ll be glad to have him help me.”

“Oh hear!” Siegfried said. “He’s shaping up to be an excellent vet indeed! Yes, James, take him with you. Er, what time will you be back?”

“We might be rather late; sounds like it will be a long job.”

“Very good, very good. I’ll see you two later then. Well, Tristan? Aren’t you going?” Tristan was still staring, stunned at Siegfried. He seemed to gather himself again.

“Right, yes!” He stood up quickly, dropped his napkin on the table and hurried after James out into the hallway. The moment the living room door was closed he sagged, all the nervous tension leaving him. James left him leaning against the door and went to gather the instruments. When he came back Tristan had brought the car around to the front door.

“Thanks Tris.” He said, sliding into the passenger’s seat.

“Skowburrow farm wasn’t it?” Tris’s voice was steady again, but still a shade quieter than usual.

“Yes.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Pig with a cut ear. Needs a tetanus shot.” Tristan shot him a puzzled glance.

“That’s hardly urgent. And it doesn’t need an extra pair of hands either.”

“Well no, but if I’d spent five more minutes with that Uncle of yours I’d have ended up punching him in the face. And if I’d left you there with him I would have had to punch myself in the face.”

“Oh.”

Nothing more was said on the drive or as James stitched the pig’s ear and administered the injection. As they drove back towards Darrowby Tristan began to tense up again. James shot him a glance.

“Shall we go and have a pint or two then? I’m sure Siegfried will handle anything that comes up.” He said. Tristan seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.
“That sounds absolutely fantastic James. I don’t mind admitting.” They pulled up outside the Drover’s and Tristan turned the engine off but he made no move to get out the car. James stayed still too, waiting to see if Tris would open up to him.

“It was the happiest day of my life you know.” Tris said abruptly, staring straight out the windshield.

“What was?”

“The day Siegfried offered to let me come live here. I must have been about fifteen. He’d only bought the practice the day before. Came straight to the house where I was living. First words out of his mouth ‘Do you want to come live with me?’ I couldn’t say yes fast enough.”

“He’s a good man, your brother.”

“I know. I owe him a lot.” Tris sighed and moved, looking James full in the face. “Mother cared but she was easily overruled by Uncle. I don’t know how I would have survived without Siegfried. I don’t know how I managed when he was at university. Or when he was a student vet, working in other’s practices. I mean, I know he shouts at me and all, but at least he cares.”

“That he does.” Tristan smiled slightly.

“You’re a good friend James. Sorry for being a bit maudlin. Wasn’t expecting to see Uncle. Haven’t seen him in years actually.”

“Siegfried sees him though?”

“Mother still lives with him. It’s the main reason I don’t go and see her more often. Can never be quite sure if he’ll be there.”

“I see.”

“Mmm. Come on James, I have a sudden urge to get entirely drunk. And I’m fairly sure Siegfried may even be sympathetic in the morning!”

“Really?”

“Well, no not really but hope springs eternal!”

They went into the pub and collected their pints, keeping the conversation firmly fixed on nothing deeper than the cricket scores and the barmaid. Two hours in, as they were preparing to head back, Tristan put down his pint and said quietly.

“The reason I became a vet? Entirely because Siegfried was one. Never even thought about leaving him to be something else.”