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Holly Starcross

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When Holly Starcross was six, her sophisticated mother decamped overnight from a Derbyshire farm and her seven-year unsuccessful marriage to Holly's father, a countryman working with horses. She took with her the protesting Holly, and for the next eight years has blocked any contact between father and daughter. All this time, we are told, Phil Starcross has not known where his daughter is. Since Holly's mother has meanwhile become a nationally famous television presenter, not even her father's lack of a television set can quite account for his snail-paced detective work, and this is only one of the novel's many implausibilities. The story opens as he at last traces Holly, and takes her away in his battered car for a few illicit and belated getting-to-know-you days. When Holly's mother finally catches up with them at her father's cottage, Holly must choose. The familiar distress of broken marriages is sharpened here by a version of Solomon's judgement: Holly's father goes away to spare her the pain of choosing, and in doing so wins her with his more unselfish love. The story, though readably told, is a mass of cliches from start to finish. Its real subject is not the competing claims of parents but of lifestyles: the brittle, glittery, urban media world versus rural Derbyshire and horses. Holly opts for Derbyshire, and so, quite clearly, does the author.

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