



**What really lies beneath our green and
pleasant land?**

Local journalist, Richard Loach, is about to learn the shocking truth, when he visits National Drill's latest fracking site.

FRACKING HELL!

The newly laid tarmac road was smooth; snaking darkly ahead of them in the morning sunlight. The big Land Rover was almost soundless, adding to Simon's sense of unease and inadequacy. He was just a jobbing journalist for a local newspaper, why had he been invited into the vast, moneyed, corporate world of National Drill?

The driver shifted the car down into second gear. 'We're nearly there.'

Simon looked ahead and felt underwhelmed. He wasn't sure what he'd expected, maybe something like the oil fields in the title-sequence of Dallas, or chimneys belching smoke; either way he hadn't expected this. Considering the controversy surrounding the Fracking site, the debates in parliament, the flurry of petitions and new protest groups; visually at least, it looked unimportant.

Their journey ended at an eight-foot-high chain-link fence with a small security booth behind it. As they drew up he saw a low pre-fab building to the right and a concreted area with a couple of tankers parked on it.

The driver stopped and turned to him. 'Have you got your ID?'

Simon nodded and fumbled in his pocket for his East Sussex Herald staff card. A man in a hard hat and high-vis appeared beside him and poked a calloused hand through his window. Simon passed his ID over and smiled; underneath the relentless sun the man's face was almost entirely lost in the shadow cast by his hard-hat.

He handed the card back to Simon. 'Please follow me.'

Simon grabbed his bag and thanked the driver. He'd forgotten how high off the ground the Land Rover was and tripped as he got out of it, knocking his knees painfully on the tarmac.

The security guard watched him impassively. 'Careful.'

Simon stood up and brushed off his jeans. 'Yes, sorry. I'm ok.'

They set off at a brisk pace towards the pre-fab he had spotted from the other side of the gate. The site was busy with a number of burly men, who bared little resemblance to the young, smiling blonde woman that National Drill had put on the home page of their website. His guide opened the door to the pre-fab and left him there. When his eyes had adjusted to the relative gloom, Simon saw a tall, tanned, pot-bellied man, who was smiling widely, revealing a row of perfect polar-white teeth. He strode over and held out his hand.

'Mr Loach, it's a pleasure to meet you!' The man's voice was loud and American. Simon took his hand and endured a knuckle-crushingly

enthusiastic shake. 'I'm Brad Colby, East *Sus-sex* area manager for National Drill.' Brad pronounced *Sus-sex* as if it was a newly coined form of gender-identity.

Simon suppressed a smile. 'A pleasure to meet you Mr Colby and thank you for inviting me.'

Brad gestured to his left and for the first time Simon noticed there was someone else in the room, a nervous looking skinny young man virtually hidden behind a large PC monitor. 'This is Richard Edwards, our Geo-surveyor for the Ashfield site.'

The young man got up from his desk and shook Simon's hand considerably more limply than his boss had done.

'Before we go for the drill field tour I thought you might like to find out more about what National Drill is doing down here in East *Sus-sex*!' He picked up a remote-control and gestured towards a large flat screen TV in the corner, then seemed to think better of it and put it down again. 'Hey, Simon, you must be mighty thirsty on such a hot day. Bet you'd like a drink first!' In a strangely showy way Brad went over to a small sink and poured two glasses of water. One he drank instantly, smacking his lips and sighing as he replaced the empty glass on the drainer; the other he brought over to Simon. For a moment Simon was non-plussed; but then it dawned on him; *nothing to see here* Brad was trying to say, like that Tory MP who forced his kid to eat a burger during the Mad Cow disease scare in the nineties. Simon sniffed at the water then took a sip. It tasted fine.

Brad smiled and picked up the remote control again. 'I don't know how much you know about Fracking?'

'Well -' Simon had been about to mention the You Tube video he'd seen from Nebraska where a lady who lived near a Fracking site had started to pull yellow water laced with arsenic from her well; the fact that the United States Geological Survey had confirmed that injecting pressurised fluids into the ground was inducing earthquakes in many US States; let alone the fact that if large amounts of methane were accidentally released into the atmosphere it could trigger an extinction-level event; but Brad cut across him; closing his eyes and raising his hand - palm out towards Simon, as if hushing a querulous child.

'Now, Simon, you look like an intelligent man to me, so let's cut the crap and stick to the facts. This is a much-maligned industry.' Brad hoiked his belt up his prodigious belly; a pointless exercise as far as Simon could see as it merely sank again the instant it was released. '*National Drill* acknowledges that mistakes were made in the early days - but we've come a long way from there. We're now one of the most highly regulated industries in *The World*, and we're giving your community £100,000, yep, you heard me right: *£100,000!* Now think

what you could do with that kinda money!' He raised his eyebrows at Simon.

'I'm sure a lot of good things could be done, but it doesn't take away from some very significant concerns -'

Brad silenced him again. 'I brought you here Simon so you could tell people the facts in your newspaper. So here's a little video that will tell you everything you need to know.'

Ten minutes later they emerged from the pre-fab, blinking against the hot white-light outside, and Simon's scalp instantly started to sweat under his hard-hat. Brad (now sporting a pair of mirrored Ray Bans) stopped for a second to talk to one of the operatives. When he'd finished he laid a meaty hand on Simon's shoulder. 'You ready to meet our lady?'

The drill was about the height of two men and set in the middle of a grassy field. It was surrounded by a metal cage, about eight-feet square and the whole thing was silent; no oiled pumping cogs, no plethora of pipes or machinery. Whatever the the drill was doing, it was doing it quietly and discreetly.

Brad beamed at him. 'Don't look like much, does it? But let me tell you, this baby is drilling six thousand feet deep - that's twelve times the height of your crazy i360 they got down there in Brighton! From the natural gas she's releasin' we can make a Mega Watt of e-lectricity for East *Sus-sex* every day!'

Simon cleared his throat. 'What about safety?'

'I'm mighty glad you asked me that.' Brad came up close to him and crossed his arms against the barrel of his chest. 'We have no less than eighty seismic activity readers in this field and we operate a traffic light system - green means AOK, Yella' means reduce the pressure and red means suspend the fracturing. You're as safe here as you were when you was a little boy sat on yer Mamma's knee.'

Simon pointed towards the drill, feeling a bit foolish. 'That's not the traffic light thing is it? Just asking because the light's orange.'

A lot of things happened at once. The tan leaked away from Brad's face, several men rushed over towards the drill and Simon felt a tremor - slight but unmistakable - beneath his feet. A number of workers - a fluorescent blur in their yellow high-vis - had opened the drill cage and were frantically adjusting things and attempting to turn a large wheel, which appeared to be stuck.

There was another tremor, greater this time, and a cloud of crows burst from a nearby tree and launched noisily into the sky. The light by the drill had moved to red. Brad ran towards it screaming - 'Suspend the frack! SUSPEND THE FRACK!'

One of the men shouted back at him. 'We have! But it's not making any difference.'

There was a boom, muted but powerful - and the ground in front of the drill suddenly split, revealing an open wound of dark soil. The turf moved in waves then suddenly erupted, knocking the men forward. Another boom, another crack and the drill shuddered then keened sideways, falling to the earth with a thud like a felled tree.

As if it was a ripe fruit opening up to reveal its inner flesh, the ground underneath the drill swelled then split at the core. The centre continued to erupt, creating a dark flower of spilled soil and rocks. Simon watched, immobilised with fascination and terror; Brad stood a few feet away from him, his jaw hanging open. Still the mound of earth pushed upward, the ground trembling against the power of deep and constant movement.

Simon wondered if a giant boulder had been pushed up by the pressure of the drilling, but then a man screamed. At first Simon couldn't catch what he said, but then it was clearer: 'There's hair, it's got hair!' His glance went from the man, who was now running away then back to the mound. It appeared to be covered in a mane of thick, muddy dark hair, the strands as thick as ropes. There was another huge tremor, almost knocking Simon off his feet, and the mound moved again - this time in a considered and sinuous way. It changed shape, elongating and un-ravelling what seemed, impossibly, to be limbs; huge and muscled, as dark and rough as tree-bark.

A figure, the size of a house, straightened itself, facing away from them. On its back there was a wound, oozing a thick rust-brown liquid. Behind Simon someone started screaming, it took him a moment to realise that it was Brad. The figure turned slowly, the earth rolling beneath its feet. Simon could barely breathe, his heart was beating so fast. When it had turned fully, Simon saw, with an utterly overwhelming feeling of something profound and terrible, that it was like a woman. Huge heavy breasts covered with veins as big as tree roots, hung from beneath the muddy curtain of hair. Its stomach was rounded, the legs short and heavy with dark elephantine flesh. It swung its head towards them as if sniffing something out.

It started to advance, Brad's screams sharpened. After a few steps, it stopped and squatted, bringing its face closer to the ground. A hand, the size of a car, came up and parted the oily mane of hair. The creature's eyes focussed in on Simon, her huge iris' like a pair golden moons, presented a glinting galactic depth that he wanted to fall into. As he looked back at her, he realised the profound feeling that had overwhelmed him earlier was of one of sorrow and rage.

Suddenly she moved her attention away from him and towards Brad, who was still screaming. With a casual movement the giant creature swept her hand along the grass, brushing Brad and the rest of the crew away and sending them hurtling like exploded skittles across the field.

Their bodies landed in strange and terrible angles against the fence and across the road.

With another huge, earth-ripping movement she turned and bounded through the perimeter fence, flattening it as if it was a piece of paper. Simon watched her crash through a line of trees and disappear behind the curve of some distant fields.

The next morning above a drone photograph of white tents and torn-up earth the headline reads: 'FRACKING HELL! The True story behind the Ashfield Disaster, by sole survivor Richard Loach'.

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