

THE GIRL IN WILDERNESS WOOD

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Excerpt from Part 1

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As someone else once wrote, this is not a diary. These words are written thirty years after the events described.

Monday 8th to Wednesday 10th October, 1979

Some places feel suspended, like islands cut off from real events, from anything important. Eversley seemed that way, when I first arrived there. I thought it was the sort of place where nothing ever happened at all.

I'd been told I was going to London, so as I'd left behind the lowering skies of my Dartmoor home, my 16-year-old head had been buzzing with visions of the city I was about to experience for the first time: bustling thoroughfares, the King's Road and Carnaby Street, Joe Strummer spotted on a tube train. I pictured myself there as well, walking down Oxford Street, living out Paul Weller's words in *Strangetown*.

But Eversley was about as far from all of this as Dartmoor.

It was a large new suburb on the far outskirts of the city - sprawling, stiflingly comfortable, an ultimate bland landscape. Its crowning glory was a mammoth shopping centre, a cathedral to retail and American fast food. Oxford Street was 20 miles away. It may as well have been on the moon.

Even now, after so many years, I can still relive the heaviness, that submerging sensation I felt on first seeing Eversley's labyrinthine streets. It seemed a paragon of tedium.

However, I was judging a book by its cover. It wouldn't be long before I glimpsed something else below the surface. I saw the cracks.

I not only saw them, I walked through them.

The circumstances of my leaving Dartmoor had been strange. My mother's behaviour had been confusing: she'd seemed so determined that I should go to Eversley, but at times so distressed that I was leaving, that I told her I'd stay, only to have her insist, with tears in her eyes, that I must go, I must, I must.

"Daniel, I can't keep an eye on you while you're out of school," had been her explanation. *Out of school* was euphemistic. I'd been suspended, but she couldn't bring herself to use the word. "You know I can't take the time off work 'cause it's just me..." *It's just me* was also euphemistic. "And I don't want you being left on your own."

I assumed she was worried about something else happening. Something like what had happened with Michael Travis, in the form room that day. But I was adamant that had been nothing to do with me, that it was impossible for anyone to do that to another person. Even so, since that day, all my classmates had become afraid of me.

"It's very kind of Uncle Clive to offer to have you to stay," she went on. "Don't you want to see London?"

"Yeah, but why do I have to go for the whole two weeks?"

"Because I'd feel better knowing there's someone keeping an eye on you every day."

I sighed. "Doesn't Uncle Clive go to work?"

“No, he’s quite old now.”

“What did he used to do for a job?”

She had burst out laughing in reply.

I didn’t know why. All I knew about Uncle Clive was that he was not really my uncle but an old friend of my father’s. I’d only met him once, when I’d been six, and all I remembered was his slow way of speaking and the way he’d stared at me, without meeting my gaze directly, his watery brown eyes so very sad. I’d assumed at the time that he was sad because my father was dead.

As soon as I arrived at Uncle Clive’s house I began to realise why my mother had laughed. He was hapless and muddled, not someone you could imagine ever having been together enough to hold down a job. I wondered what had made him this way. Alcohol perhaps? I suspected he liked a drink from the pink haze of broken veins across his cheeks (my mother had pointed this out as a sign of heavy drinking in our village vet).

His peering, doleful eyes hadn’t changed, but now his face was more fissured than I remembered, his wild hair almost white, his speech more halting than ever, as if his brain was running at 33rpm, while the world turned on at 45.

He was utterly at odds with his surroundings, with Eversley’s executive homes and brand new Ford Granadas; Steptoe living in Stepford. His house, externally quite tidy, was inside an epitome of disarray, with half his possessions lying in loose piles on the floor. Clive would wander aimlessly through these chaotic spaces, smoking endless licorice roll-ups and muttering as he tried to complete some simple task over several hours.

What was he doing here, this thin, wasted old man, in this well-to-do suburb? His clothes and all his possessions were utterly dilapidated - how had he been able to afford this house with its large garden, the largest in the street? And what on earth was *I* doing here staying with him? This wasn’t London! This was everything young people went to London to get away from!

I was furious with my mother and spent my entire first day in Eversley being studiously livid, planning what I was going to say to express my disgust when I phoned her that evening.

But of course I barely said any of it, and she nipped in the bud any ideas I might have about leaving: “You’ve only been there five minutes – you have to give it a chance, Daniel.” And, despite my outward appearance of rebellion, the Clash t-shirts and DMs, I was still a boy who didn’t want to upset his mother.

With hindsight, it couldn’t be clearer to me that I was hiding behind my punk appearance. Looking different turned out to be the perfect way of deflecting attention from my lack of confidence, my awkwardness. Most people avoided me. And that was fine – that way they wouldn’t find out that I really *was* different to everyone else.

Uncle Clive kept asking me about Michael Travis and the incident in the form room. I evaded his questions. It wasn’t hard – I often just changed the subject during one of the longer pauses in his faltering speech. But after a day or so of this he began to show frustration, and I soon found that he had a temper. His outburst came towards the end of my second day there.

It was just after dinner (or rather the frozen Findus rubbish and instant dessert that still passed for dinner in the late 1970s). Out of nowhere he suddenly started asking me if I ever had any strange dreams.

It wasn't the first time he'd come out with such a peculiar enquiry: *Do you get angry a lot? Do you think you're like your father? Do you sometimes feel a presence in the room when you're alone? Do you like the two tall trees halfway down the garden?*

He was on to me - he knew I was different, knew I was hiding something from everyone, and was determined to get me to talk about it. The problem was I was also hiding it from myself.

Generally I mumbled out a few monosyllabic replies, and was doing so again when suddenly he yelled at me:

"You know you're being extremely fucking rude!"

I sat agog, my glass of Coke brought to a standstill on its way to my mouth. Of course I frequently used the word he'd just used, as did all my friends back home - though never in front of adults. Occasionally adults had said that word in front of me, in a fit of temper. But an adult had never used that word *at* me before. I stared at Uncle Clive - I couldn't have been more astonished if I'd looked up to find him peeing on the carpet. His expression was shamefaced and I think an apology was finding its ponderous way to his lips, but at that moment, I think mainly out of sheer embarrassment, I started to laugh.

He stood up then, leaning across the table. "What's so funny?!.....You think I'm asking these questions to entertain myself?!.....I despair at young people!.....*No respect!...*" It may have been the most drawn out rant in history, the pauses in which were filled with my barely stifled laughter.

"Look at you with your bover boots and your spiky hair!" he went on. "Little wonder the school threw you out! Little wonder you've been sent away!...*Your father would be ashamed of you!*"

The laughter died in my throat.

Uncle Clive looked at me with an expression of rigid horror, knowing he'd gone too far. He cleared his throat and I knew the apology was finding its way up from the depths again, but I ran out of the room before he could get it out, before he could see my tears.

During the night, I was woken by Clive talking loudly in his sleep. Most of it was incomprehensible nonsense, grunts, noises of dismay, but the loudest utterance I heard quite clearly:

"Snowdrop!" he cried. *"Bloody snowdrop!"*

The man's a frigging lunatic, I decided. I'm glad he's not really my uncle - they say madness runs in families.

I turned over and went back to sleep.

At breakfast, Clive did succeed in making his apology. "Erm...I'm sorry I said those things," he muttered, his face grey and worn. "I didn't mean them...I was angry...I'm awfully glad you've come to stay and, um, I want you to enjoy your time here...I hope we can be friends."

I grunted a sort of agreement to this.

"Start with a clean slate?" he offered.

“I’m going to London today,” I said tersely. As far as I was concerned he’d crossed a line and I wasn’t in any hurry to allow him back on the right side of it.

He looked a little stung but said, “Oh, um...good idea, you er...won’t be wanting lunch then.”

“No, I’m catching the next train.”

I’d been sold down the river with the idea that I’d be staying in London, but since this was the closest I’d ever been, I was going to damn well see the place.

With a shiny new A-Z in the pocket of my bike jacket, I walked a mile to get a bus that took an eon to reach the railway station, where a ponderous slam-door train trundled towards the capital.

This pilgrimage was a somewhat scary affair but I survived it. The sheer scale of the city rolling past the train window made me feel like a little lost child. The tube was congested and bereft of any members of The Clash. It spat me out at South Kensington and I walked down to the King’s Road, feeling like I deserved a medal.

I watched faux punks pose for tourist cameras. I didn’t know it but I’d missed the real thing by about two years. Appropriately, The Only Ones seemed to be singing “*I’m always in the wrong place at the wrong time...*” in every record shop. I wandered, wide-eyed, in and out of the boutiques and began to feel less overwhelmed. At 4.30 I headed back, with a happy sense of achievement and an eagerness to return. Perhaps it was worth enduring Eversley if all this was just a train ride away.

But there’d been a price, quite literally – the trip had made a noticeable hole in the money my mother had sent me away with. So as I got off the train it was with the realisation that trips into the capital would have to be rationed.

I walked along the platform to the way out, which was via the waiting room. An elderly woman was its only occupant. As I entered she looked up at me. She had a remarkable face, looking for all the world like an aged film star. I realised that she was gazing at me with some surprise and I thought that I’d made her jump, but as I got nearer, surprise turned to open mouthed shock.

She was sitting to one side of the exit and as I made to leave, now quite unnerved by her penetrating stare, she reached out and grabbed me. She looked at her hand holding my arm for a moment, as if surprised that I was flesh and bone, then said, “I know you!”

“Do you?” I said, too polite to just pull my arm away and leave.

“Who are you?!” the woman demanded. Her sharp-featured face had gone very pale, her eyes wide and troubled. “I *know* you!”

I shook my head and said. “I’m from Devon. I’ve only been here three days.”

“I know your face!” she insisted, almost accused.

I didn’t know what else to say and tried to ease my arm out of her grasp.

“Nan, what are you doing?” said a voice behind me.

I turned and saw a girl of about fourteen walking towards us.

“Abigail, why is he here again?!” the old woman demanded.

“It’s all right Nan,” her granddaughter said, and put an arm round her shoulders. “Nothing to worry about.”

Finally, the hand on my arm released its grip but the old woman continued to insist, “I know him, Abi, I know him!”

Her granddaughter looked at me apologetically. “She had a stroke not long ago, and sometimes she gets confused.”

I nodded, feeling relieved. “I tried to tell her she’s got the wrong person. Will she be all right?”

“I can hear what you’re saying about me!” the old woman said crossly.

“Yeah, she’ll be fine. Sorry about that,” her granddaughter said.

“That’s okay,” I replied, and walked through the door.

Are all the old people here nutters? I wondered as I walked towards the bus stop.

“How was the big smoke?” Clive enquired on my return.

I replied in brief then asked him if I could play the new record I’d bought. It was only a single – all I could afford. He looked perturbed at the prospect but agreed because he was keen to make amends.

He began to move stacks of the local newspapers he seemed to spend a lot of time poring over off what looked like a deep coffee table. Once the battered tabletop was cleared he lifted it to reveal a record player and VHF radio. Grandly, he called it ‘The Radiogram’.

As *I Fought the Law* boomed out of this piece of furniture, with a somehow wooden sound, Uncle Clive stood by with unconcealed bafflement.

“Oh, yes, it’s very...mmm,” he mumbled, trying to feign some appreciation.

As the autochanger clicked I glanced at him and found him staring at me again. I thought I could read what he was trying to hide in those liquid, solemn eyes. It wasn’t anger now, or sadness. It was something much more enduring. It was disappointment.

I wasn’t what he’d expected. I wasn’t what he’d hoped for. But why had he had any hopes or expectations?

The distance between us was growing not closing. He was looking for something in me, and I had no idea what it was.