

THE GIRL IN WILDERNESS WOOD

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Second excerpt from Part 1

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Thursday, 11th October

Uncle Clive had been nudging me towards going out for a walk for days but I'd resisted. I was used to walking from my house into the wildness of Dartmoor, and wasn't in a hurry to traipse round suburbia. However, the day after the London trip I knew I had to get out, to get away from Clive, from the house, from the crushing boredom.

And so, on my fourth day in Eversley, I went out and wandered the streets, feeling that there really was nothing else for it.

I left via the back door (the front was unusable because the porch was full of junk) and glanced across the back garden. My bedroom window overlooked it, so it hadn't escaped my notice that, while Clive's house was more or less identical to those of his neighbours, his garden was more than twice the size.

It also looked very different to the gardens around it. While the neighbour's patches were neat, open and light, Clive's was wild, enclosed and shaded. Dense *Leylandii* screened it on both sides and to the rear. In the centre, surrounded by more *Leylandii* and net fencing secured with metal stakes, stood two oak trees.

Looking at them now I felt the faintest shiver creep down my back. These were the trees Clive had asked me about and suddenly I had an opinion: I didn't like them. I knew it was stupid – though not ancient they were the oldest trees for miles around, in all this bland newness. I should have liked their fissured bark and clutching branches, but for some reason I couldn't help wishing they were a bit further away from the house.

I walked a little hurriedly, along the side path and into the warm sunshine at the front of the house. I stood on the pavement, deciding which way to go. Arbitrarily, I headed left.

I had nothing to guide me. I'd checked my A to Z but the coverage stopped short of Eversley. This fitted with my feeling that Eversley was completely beyond the pale, on the fringes.

Although the weather was good for October, I didn't see a soul as I walked. I wasn't surprised – I'd observed the rhythm of this place by now. Between 7 and 8.30 a.m. the inhabitants of Eversley poured out, in their Austin Princesses and Volvos, the majority towards the station or the A20 heading into London. Then the place was quiet as the grave until their evening return. There's a term we have now that I don't remember hearing back then for this kind of place. Eversley was a 'dormitory'. That single word says more about its anaesthetised atmosphere than a whole paragraph could.

Having reached the end of Uncle Clive's road, I started to walk at random, making ad hoc turns, following my nose. Not the best strategy, as I had an appalling sense of direction in towns, but I had no anticipation of finding anything, not really caring if I got lost.

After a while I was walking in a semi-trance, paying little attention to where I was, but glad at least to be out of the house. The drone of the busy trunk roads that enclosed the suburb became hypnotic.

Perhaps inevitably, with nothing else to think about, I began to dwell on Michael Travis. I mentally replayed what had happened, to try to prove to myself yet again that I hadn't done anything to him, that he was obviously unbalanced. The dreadful sound that had come out of his mouth rebounded in some deep recess of my memory, that and the rattling of his boots on the classroom floor. I told myself, for the

hundredth time, that what had happened could not have been down to me. No-one could have done that to another person.

In an effort to distract myself, I began to look around at the houses and speculate about the lives of their inhabitants.

I wondered how anyone could choose to spend their life in a place like this. It felt like the people here had more or less ceased to exist, yet somehow still continued to get up and go to work every day. A lyric from *Dark Side of the Moon* (which of course I wouldn't have admitted to owning, since hearing *Give 'em Enough Rope*) had kept playing over and over in my mind since my arrival in Eversley:

'Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way.'

On I walked, through these anonymous streets.

Sometimes I wonder if it was inevitable that I would find the woodland that day. I thought I was walking an arbitrary route. Yet I went straight to it.

When I first saw it, it looked unremarkable. I was on the pavement of a busy feeder road and could hardly see the trees, just the crowns of the tallest oaks, like furtive heads peeking over rooftops. An alleyway between two houses led to a kissing gate, and a muddy path into the wood.

Something about it gave me pause. Was it the fact that bramble was clambering all over the kissing gate, as if it was hardly ever used? I walked slowly down the alleyway.

At the end I paused and glanced left and right. The edge of the woodland ran for some distance behind the houses, but I couldn't get a clear idea of its size. I shouldered my way past the briars and through the protesting gate.

Once into the wood, the way became much easier – the shade of the canopy had kept the path clear. It reminded me of a small woodland close to my village that I'd played in a lot as a young child, and I was surprised to see no evidence of kids having been there. In fact there was very little sign of the hundreds of people living within walking distance of the wood having been in there at all – no sweet wrappers, no dens, no teenage lovers' initials carved in bark.

Then, in contradiction to this thought, I did see someone. A young woman was also following the path, some distance ahead of me.

The path wound on. The trees were fairly dense and I couldn't see any houses now. I started to see and hear wildlife while, up ahead, my fellow walker passed through pulses of light and shade.

Looking at her again, I thought she was somewhat out of place. She was wearing a long white dress; not exactly typical of the leisure-wear of Eversley's populace, which was as characterless as their houses and cars.

The birdsong was intensifying and the undergrowth was full of the scurrings of little animals. I crossed a stream, negotiating the most rickety-looking bridge I'd ever seen, feeling strangely at home. I'd left Dartmoor longing for the city, landed in a suburb and now found myself back in the wilds. Well, I reflected, anything was better than that shithole of a house.

The woodland was bigger than I'd anticipated. I'd been walking for more than 15 minutes now with no sign of the other side. The young woman was still ahead of me, occasionally hidden by the bends in the path. I hoped that she didn't think I was following her, although I felt sure I was too far behind for her to be aware of me. I had little choice in the matter anyway, since this was the only path.

Perusing the girl again I couldn't help wondering about her. There was something in her demeanour. For some reason - maybe the cast of her shoulders and arms, the slightly bowed head with its dark, lank hair - I thought she was sad.

For some reason the idea came to me that I might follow her when we came to the other side of the wood.

But the other side still didn't come. On I walked, past ever more senescent trees, past dark ponds and mossy banks.

Some minutes later, I did start to perceive that I was nearing the edge of the woodland. Through the trees up ahead I could see the broken glare of open space. As I got nearer, I caught glimpses of what lay beyond the wood, and to my amazement I didn't see the clone parade of dwellings I was expecting. It was difficult to make out clearly, but what I thought I saw was a shallow valley of small fields, and not a house in sight.

I decided to get a better look, and stepped off the path. As I progressed through the dense understorey, the vista beyond the woodland's edge began to reveal itself. It *was* a little valley, broken into a patchwork by tall hedgerows. The nearest meadow was a verdant blaze in the sunlight.

As I got closer to the edge of the woodland, the pure light seemed to physically swell the air around me. My eyes adjusted to the brightness. I saw the meadow. I saw the tall grasses stirring in a breeze, the hedgerows full of birds. Then I saw the young woman and froze in mid-stride. She was standing naked at the far side of the meadow.

Facing away from me, her dark hair spilling down a back so pale it was almost colourless, she stood with her dress hanging limply in her hand. For a moment, a strange idea flitted through my mind - that if she were to turn round she would have the face of some appalling beast from a nightmare. I stood transfixed, feeling an odd mixture of revulsion and desire.

I should point out that I was pretty much a complete innocent at this age, a few adolescent fumbblings to my name, and I had not seen any of those girls naked. A mischievous voice was telling me I couldn't waste this chance to look at her. Even though I knew what I was doing was wrong, I didn't walk away and I didn't avert my eyes from her white body, that was at once lovely and disquieting.

I shifted my weight uncomfortably and my heel snapped a dry branch with a loud report that echoed across the meadow. I saw the young woman flinch and start to turn towards me.

Without hesitation, I fled.

Darting between the coppice stools with the deftness of one who's grown up playing in the woods, in seconds I was back on the path, where I began to run at full pelt, looking repeatedly over my shoulder until I was round a bend in the track. I pounded on for another few hundred yards - only then did I slow my pace.

Of course she didn't come after me. Had she even seen me? Unlikely, except perhaps as a fleeting shape in the shadows.

I made my way swiftly back along the path, past the depthless ponds, over the decaying bridge, full of guilt and excitement that felt almost like the same thing.

I didn't let up my pace, as if the quicker I got out of there the less wrong there would be in what I'd done. I soon began to get glimpses of rooftops and hear the muffled rush of cars on the busy road. I could see the innumerable back fences and manicured shrubs.

As I approached the kissing gate, I paused to look back into the wood's verdant depths, and saw the young woman in my mind's eye, her body so pale it seemed translucent, as if the sunlight passed through it. I walked down the alleyway, then stood on the pavement, out of breath, but feeling more alive than at any point since I'd arrived there.