

The Darkness Out There by Penelope Lively

She walked through flowers, the girl, ox-eye daisies and vetch and cow parsley, keeping to the track at the edge of the field. She could see the cottage in the distance, shrugged down into the dip beyond the next hedge. Mrs Rutter, Pat had said, Mrs Rutter at Nether Cottage, you don't know her, Sandra? She's a dear old thing, all on her own, of course, we try to keep an eye. A wonky leg after her op and the home help's off with a bad back this week. So could you make that your Saturday afternoon session, dear? Lovely. There'll be one of the others, I'm not sure who.

plant with
purple flowers

operation

Pat had a funny eye, a squint, so that her glance swerved away from you as she talked. And a big chest jutting under washed-out jerseys. Are people who help other people always not very nice looking? Very busy being busy; always in a rush. You didn't get people like Mrs Carpenter at the King's Arms running the Good Neighbours' Club. People with platinum highlights and spike-heel suede boots.

She looked down at her own legs, the girl, bare brown legs brushing through the grass, polleny summer grass that glistened in the sun.

She hoped it would be Susie, the other person. Or Liz. They could have a good giggle, doing the floors and that. Doing her washing, this old Mrs Rutter.

They were all in the Good Neighbours' Club, her set at school. Quite a few of the boys, too. It had become a sort of craze, the thing to do. They were really nice, some of the old people. The old folks, Pat called them. Pat had done the notice in the library: Come and have fun giving a helping hand to the old folks. Adopt a granny. And the jokey cartoon drawing of a dear old bod with specs on the end of her nose and a shawl. One or two of the old people had been a bit sharp about that.

The track followed the hedge round the field to the gate and the plank bridge over the stream. The dark reach of the spinney came right to the gate there so that she would have to walk by the edge of it with the light suddenly shutting off the bare wide sky of the field. Packer's End.

small wood

You didn't go by yourself through Packer's End if you could help it, not after tea-time, anyway. A German plane came down in the war and the aircrew were killed and there were people who'd heard them talking still,

The Darkness Out There by Penelope Lively

chattering in German on their radios, voices coming out of the trees, nasty, creepy. People said.

She kept to the track, walking in the flowers with corn running in the wind between her and the spinney. She thought suddenly of blank-eyed helmeted heads, looking at you from among branches. She wouldn't go in there for a thousand pounds, not even in bright day like now, with nothing coming out of the dark slab of trees but birdsong – blackbirds and thrushes and robins and that. It was a **rank** place, all whippy **saplings** and brambles and a **gully** with a dumped mattress and bedstead and an old fridge. And, somewhere, presumably, the crumbling rusty scraps of metal and cloth and ... bones?

with thick
vegetation

type of ditch

young trees

It was all right out here in the sunshine. Fine. She stopped to pick grass stems out of her sandal; she saw the neat print of the strap-marks against her sunburn, pink- white on brown. Somebody had said she had pretty feet, once; she looked at them, clean and plump and neat on the grass. A ladybird crawled across a toe.

When they were small, six and seven and eight, they'd been scared stiff of Packer's End. Then, they hadn't known about the German plane. It was different things then; witches and wolves and tigers. Sometimes they'd go there for a dare, several of them, **skittering** over the field and into the edge of the trees, giggling and shrieking, not too far in, just far enough for it to be scary, for the branch shapes to look like faces and clawed hands, for the wolves to rustle and creep in the greyness you couldn't quite see into, the clotted shifting depths of the place.

move lightly and
hurriedly

But after, lying on your stomach at home on the hearthrug watching telly with the curtains drawn and the dark shut out, it was cosy to think of Packer's End, where you weren't.

After they were twelve or so the witches and wolves went away. Then it was the German plane. And other things too. You didn't know who there might be around, in woods and places. Like stories in the papers. Girl attacked on lonely road. Police hunt rapist. There was this girl, people at school said, this girl some time back who'd been biking along the field path and these two blokes had come out of Packer's End. They'd had a knife, they'd threatened to carve her up, there wasn't anything she could

The Darkness Out There by Penelope Lively

do, she was at their mercy. People couldn't remember what her name was, exactly, she didn't live round here any more. Two enormous blokes, sort of gypsy types.

She put her sandal back on. She walked through the thicker grass by the hedge and felt it drag at her legs and thought of swimming in warm seas. She put her hand on the top of her head and her hair was hot from the sun, a dry burning cap. One day, this year, next year, sometime, she would go to places like on travel brochures and run into a blue sea. She would fall in love and she would get a good job and she would have one of those new **Singers** that do zig-zag stitch and make an embroidered silk coat.

make of sewing
machine

One day.

Now, she would go to this old Mrs Rutter's and have a bit of a giggle with Susie and come home for tea and wash her hair. She would walk like this through the silken grass with the wind seething the corn and the secret invisible life of birds beside her in the hedge. She would pick a blue flower and examine its complexity of pattern and petal and wonder what it was called and drop it. She would plunge her face into the powdery plate of an elderflower and smell cat, tom-cat, and sneeze and scrub her nose with the back of her hand. She would hurry through the gate and over the stream because that was a bit too close to Packer's End for comfort and she would ...

He rose from the plough beyond the hedge.

She screamed.

'Christ!' she said, 'Kerry Stevens you stupid so-and-so, what d'you want to go and do that for, you give me the fright of my life.'

He grinned. 'I seen you coming. Thought I might as well wait.'

Not Susie. Not Liz either. Kerry Stevens from Richmond Way. Kerry Stevens that none of her lot reckoned much on, with his black licked-down hair and slitty eyes. Some people you only have to look at to know they're not up to much.

'Didn't know you were in the Good Neighbours.'

He shrugged. They walked in silence. He took out an Aero bar, broke off a bit, offered it. She said oh, thanks. They went chewing towards the

The Darkness Out There by Penelope Lively

cottage, the cottage where old Mrs Rutter with her wonky leg would be ever so pleased to see them because they were really sweet, lots of the old people. Ever so grateful, the old **poppets**, was what Pat said, not that you'd put it quite like that yourself.

sweet elderly people

'Just give it a push, the door. It sticks, see. That's it.'

She seemed composed of circles, a **cottage-loaf** of a woman, with a face below which chins collapsed one into another, a creamy smiling pool of a face in which her eyes snapped and darted.

bread made of two round sections, one on top of the other

'Tea, my duck?' she said. 'Tea for the both of you? I'll put us a kettle on.'

The room was stuffy. It had a **gaudy** lino floor with the pattern rubbed away in front of the sink and round the table; the walls were cluttered with old calendars and pictures torn from magazines; there was a smell of cabbage. The **alcove** by the fireplace was filled with china ornaments: big-eyed flop-eared rabbits and beribboned kittens and flowery milkmaids and a pair of naked chubby children wearing daisy chains.

tastelessly bright and showy

a recess

The woman hauled herself from a sagging armchair. She glittered at them from the stove, manoeuvring cups, propping herself against the draining-board. 'What's your names, then? Sandra and Kerry. Well, you're a pretty girl, Sandra, aren't you. Pretty as they come. There was – let me see, who was it? – Susie, last week. That's right, Susie.' Her eyes investigated, quick as mice. 'Put your jacket on the back of the door, dear, you won't want to get that messy. Still at school, are you?'

The boy said, 'I'm leaving, July. They're taking me on at the garage, the Blue Star. I been helping out there on and off, before.'

Mrs Rutter's smiles folded into one another. Above them, her eyes examined him. 'Well, I expect that's good steady money if you'd nothing special in mind. Sugar?'

There was a view from the window out over a bedraggled garden with the stumps of **spent** vegetables and a matted flower bed and a square of shaggy grass. Beyond, the spinney reached up to the fence, a no-man's-land of **willowherb** and thistle and small trees, growing thicker and higher into the full density of woodland. Mrs Rutter said, 'Yes, you have a look out,

exhausted

plant with pink flowers

The Darkness Out There by Penelope Lively

aren't I lucky – right up beside the wood. Lovely it is in the spring, the primroses and that. Mind, there's not as many as there used to be.'

The girl said, 'Have you lived here for a long time?'

'Most of my life, dear. I came here as a young married woman, and that's a long way back, I can tell you. You'll be **courting** before long yourself, I don't doubt. Like bees round the honeypot, they'll be.'

old-fashioned
word for in a
relationship

The girl blushed. She looked at the floor, at her own feet, neat and slim and brown. She touched, secretly, the soft skin of her thigh; she felt her breasts poke up and out at the thin stuff of her top; she licked the inside of her teeth, that had only the one filling, a speck like a pin-head. She wished there was Susie to have a giggle with, not just Kerry Stevens.

The boy said, 'What'd you like us to do?'

His chin was explosive with acne; at his middle, his jeans yawned from his T-shirt, showing pale chilly flesh. Mrs Rutter said, 'I expect you're a nice strong boy, aren't you? I daresay you'd like to have a go at the grass with the old mower. Sandra can give this room a do, that would be nice, it's as much as I can manage to have a dust of the ornaments just now, I can't get down to the floor.'

When he had gone outside the girl fetched broom and mop and dustpan from a cupboard under the narrow stair. The cupboard, stacked with yellowing newspapers, smelt of damp and mouse. When she returned, the old woman was back in the armchair, a composite **chintzy** mass from which cushions oozed and her voice flowed softly on. 'That's it, dear, you just work round, give the corners a brush, if you don't mind, that's where the dust settles. Mind your pretty skirt, pull it up a bit, there's only me to see if you're showing a bit of bum. That's ever such a nice style, I expect your mum made it, did she?'

printed, multi-
coloured, glazed
fabric

The girl said, 'Actually I did.'

'Well now, fancy! You're a little dressmaker, too, are you? I was good with my needle when I was younger, my eyesight's past it now, of course. I made my own wedding dress, ivory silk with lace insets. A Vogue pattern it was, with a sweetheart neckline.'

The door opened. Kerry said, 'Where'll I put the clippings?'

The Darkness Out There by Penelope Lively

'There's the compost heap down the bottom, by the fence. And while you're down there could you get some sticks from the wood for kindling, there's a good lad.'

When he had gone she went on, 'That's a nice boy. It's a pity they put that stuff on their hair these days, sticky-looking. I expect you've got lots of boyfriends, though, haven't you?'

The girl poked in a crack at a clump of fluff. 'I don't really know Kerry that much.'

'Don't you, dear? Well, I expect you get all sorts, in your club thing, the club that Miss Hammond runs.'

'The Good Neighbours. Pat, we call her.'

'She was down here last week. Ever such a nice person. Kind. It's sad she never married.'

The girl said, 'Is that your husband in the photo, Mrs Rutter?'

'That's right, dear. In his uniform. The Ox and Bucks. After he got his stripes. He was a lovely man.'

made a sergeant
in the army

She sat back on her heels, the dustpan on her lap. The photo was yellowish, in a silver frame. 'Did he ...?'

'Killed in the war, dear. Right at the start. He was in one of the first campaigns, in Belgium, and he never came back.'

The girl saw a man with a toothbrush moustache, his army cap slicing his forehead. 'That's terrible.'

short, rectangular
moustache

'Tragic. There was a lot of tragedies in the war. It's nice it won't be like that for you young people nowadays. Touch wood, cross fingers. I like young people, I never had any children, it's been a loss, that, I've got a sympathy with young people.'

The girl emptied the dustpan into the bin outside the back door. Beyond the fence, she could see the bushes thrash and Kerry's head bob among them. She thought, rather him than me, but it's different for boys, for him anyway, he's not a nervy type, it's if you're nervy you get bothered about things like Packer's End.

She was nervy, she knew. Mum always said so.

Mrs Rutter was rummaging in a cupboard by her chair. 'Chocky? I always keep a few chockies by for visitors.' She brought out a flowered tin.

The Darkness Out There by Penelope Lively

'There. Do you know, I've had this twenty years, all but. Look at the little cornflowers. And the daisies. They're almost real, aren't they?'

'Sweet,' said the girl.

'Take them out and see if what's-'is-name would like one.'

There was a cindery path down the garden, ending at a compost heap where eggshells gleamed among leaves and grass clippings. Rags of plastic fluttered from sticks in a bed of cabbages. The girl picked her way daintily, her toes wincing against the cinders. A place in the country. One day she would have a place in the country, but not like this. Sometime. A little white house peeping over a hill, with a stream at the bottom of a crisp green lawn and an orchard with old apple trees and a brown pony. And she would walk in the long grass in this orchard in a straw hat with these two children, a boy and a girl, children with fair shiny hair like hers, and there'd be this man.

She leaned over the fence and shouted, 'Hey ...'

'What?'

She brandished the box.

He came up, dumping an armful of sticks. 'What's this for, then?'

'She said. Help yourself.'

He fished among the sweets, his fingers etched with dirt. 'I did a job on your dad's car last week. That blue Escort's his, isn't it?'

'Mmn.'

'July, I'll be starting full-time. When old Bill retires. With day-release at the tech.'

She thought of oily workshop floors, of the **fetid** undersides of cars. She couldn't stand the feel of dirt; if her hands were the least bit grubby she had to go and wash; a rim of grime under her nails could make her shudder. She said, 'I don't know how you can, all that muck.'

He fished for another chocolate. 'Nothing wrong with a bit of dirt. What you going to do, then?'

'Secretarial.'

Men didn't mind so much. At home, her dad did things like unblocking the sink and cleaning the stove; Mum was the same as her, just the feel of

smelling extremely unpleasant

The Darkness Out There by Penelope Lively

grease and stuff made her squirm. They couldn't either of them wear anything that had a stain or a spot.

He said, 'I don't go much on her.'

'Who?'

He waved towards the cottage.

'She's all right. What's wrong with her, then?'

He shrugged. 'I dunno. The way she talks and that.'

'She lost her husband,' said the girl. 'In the war.' She considered him, across the fence, over a chasm. Mum said boys matured later, in many ways.

'There's lots of people done that.'

She looked beyond him, into distances. 'Tragic, actually. Well, I'll go back and get on. She says can you see to her bins when you've got the sticks. She wants them carried down for the dustmen.'

Mrs Rutter watched her come in, glinting from the cushions. 'That's a good girl. Put the tin back in the cupboard, dear.'

'What would you like me to do now?'

'There's my little bit of washing by the sink. Just the personal things to rinse through. That would be ever so kind.'

The girl ran water into the basin. She measured in the soap flakes. She squeezed the pastel nylons, the floating sinuous tights. 'It's a lovely colour, that turquoise.'

'My niece got me that last Christmas. Nightie and a little jacket to go. I was telling you about my wedding dress. The material came from Macy's, eight yards. I cut it on the cross, for the hang. Of course, I had a figure then.' She heaved herself round in the chair. 'You're a lovely shape, Sandra. You take care you stay that way.'

'I can get a spare tyre,' the girl said. 'If I'm not careful.'

Outside, the bin lids rattled.

'I hope he's minding my edging. I've got lobelia planted out along that path.'

'I love blue flowers.'

'You should see the wood in the spring, with the bluebells. There's a place right far in where you get lots coming up still. I used to go in there

profound difference
between people

plant with blue
and white flowers

The Darkness Out There by Penelope Lively

picking every year before my leg started playing me up. Jugs and jugs of them, for the scent. Haven't you ever seen them?'

something loosely coiled and knotted

The girl shook her head. She wrung out the clothes, gathered up the damp skein. 'I'll put these on the line, shall I?'

When she returned the boy was bringing in the filled coal-scuttle and a bundle of sticks.

'That's it,' said Mrs Rutter. 'Under the sink, that's where they go. You'll want to have a wash after that, won't you? Put the kettle on, Sandra, and we'll top up the pot.'

The boy ran his hands under the tap. His shirt clung to his shoulder-blades, damp with sweat. He looked over the bottles of detergent, the jug of parsley, the handful of flowers tucked into a coronation mug. He said, 'Is that the wood where there was that German plane came down in the war?'

'Don't start on that,' said the girl. 'It always gives me the willies.'

strong feeling of nervous discomfort

'What for?'

'Scary.'

The old woman reached forward and prodded the fire. 'Put a bit of coal on for me, there's a good boy. What's to be scared of? It's over and done with, good riddance to bad rubbish.'

'It was there, then?'

'Shut up,' said the girl.

'Were you here?'

'Fill my cup up, dear, would you. I was here. Me and my sister. My sister Dot. She's dead now, two years. Heart. That was before she was married of course, nineteen forty-two, it was.'

'Did you see it come down?'

She chuckled. 'I saw it come down all right.'

'What was it?' said the boy. 'Messerschmitt?'

German aircraft

'How would I know that, dear? I don't know anything about aeroplanes. Anyway, it was all smashed up by the time I saw it, you couldn't have told t'other from which.'

The girl's hand hovered, the tea-cup halfway to her mouth. She sipped, put it down. 'You saw it? Ooh, I wouldn't have gone anywhere near.'

The Darkness Out There by Penelope Lively

'It would have been burning,' said the boy. 'It'd have gone up in flames.'

'There weren't any flames; it was just stuck there in the ground, end up, with mess everywhere. Drop more milk, dear, if you don't mind.'

The girl shuddered. 'I s'pose they'd taken the bodies away by then.'

Mrs Rutter picked out a tea-leaf with the tip of the spoon. She drank, patted the corner of her mouth delicately with a tissue. 'No, no, 'course not. There was no one else seen it come down. We'd heard the engine and you could tell there was trouble, the noise wasn't right, and we looked out and saw it come down smack in the trees. 'Course we hadn't the telephone so there was no ringing the police or the Warden at Clapton. Dot said we should maybe bike to the village but it was a filthy wet night, pouring cats and dogs, and fog too, and we didn't know if it was one of ours or one of theirs, did we? So Dot said better go and have a look first.'

'But either way ...' the boy began.

'We got our wellies on, and Dot had the big lantern, and we went off. It wasn't very far in. We found it quite quick and Dot grabbed hold of me and pointed and we saw one of the wings sticking up with the markings on and we knew it was one of theirs. We cheered, I can tell you.'

The boy stared at her over the rim of the cup, blank-faced.

'Dot said bang goes some more of the bastards, come on let's get back into the warm and we just started back when we heard this noise.'

'Noise?'

'Sort of moaning.'

'Oh,' cried the girl. 'How awful, weren't they ...'

'So we got up closer and Dot held the lantern so we could see and there was three of them, two in the front and they were dead, you could see that all right, one of them had his ...'

The girl grimaced. 'Don't.'

Mrs Rutter's chins shook, the pink and creamy chins. 'Good job you weren't there, then, my duck. Not that we were laughing at the time, I can tell you, rain **teeming** down and a raw November night, and that sight under our noses. It wasn't pretty but I've never been squeamish, nor Dot neither. And then we saw the other one.'

pouring

The Darkness Out There by Penelope Lively

'The other one?' said the boy warily.

'The one at the back. He was trapped, see, the way the plane had broken up. There wasn't any way he could get out.'

The girl stiffened. 'Oh, lor, you mean he ...'

'He was hurt pretty bad. He was kind of talking to himself. Something about **mutter, mutter** ... Dot said he's not going to last long, and a good job too, three of them that'll be. She'd been a VAD so she knew a bit about casualties, see.' Mrs Rutter licked her lips; she looked across at them, her eyes darting. 'Then we went back to the cottage.'

There was silence. The fire gave a heave and a sigh. 'You what?' said the boy.

'Went back inside. It was bucketing down, cats and dogs.'

The boy and girl sat quite still, on the far side of the table.

'That was eighteen months or so after my hubby didn't come back from Belgium.' Her eyes were on the girl; the girl looked away. 'Tit for tat, I said to Dot.'

After a moment she went on. 'Next morning it was still raining and blow me if the bike hadn't got a puncture. I said to Dot, I'm not walking to the village in this, and that's flat, and Dot was running a bit of a temp, she had the 'flu or something coming on. I tucked her up warm and when I'd done the chores I went back in the wood, to have another look. He must have been a tough so-and-so, that **Jerry**, he was still mumbling away. It gave me a turn, I can tell you. I'd never imagined he'd last the night. I could see him better, in the day-time; he was bashed up pretty nasty. I'd thought he was an old bloke, too, but he wasn't. He'd have been twentyish, that sort of age.'

The boy's spoon clattered to the floor; he did not move.

'I reckon he may have seen me, not that he was in a state to take much in. He called out something. I thought, oh no, you had this coming to you, mate, there's a war on. You won't know that expression – it was what everybody said in those days. I thought, why should I do anything for you? Nobody did anything for my Bill, did they? I was a widow at thirty-nine. I've been on my own ever since.'

The boy shoved his chair back from the table.

'Mutter' = German
for 'mother'

wartime slang
term for 'German'

The Darkness Out There by Penelope Lively

'He must have been a tough bastard, like I said. He was still there that evening, but the next morning he was dead. The weather'd perked up by then and I walked to the village and got a message to the people at Clapton. They were ever so surprised; they didn't know there'd been a Jerry plane come down in the area at all. There were lots of people came to take bits for souvenirs, I had a bit myself but it's got mislaid, you tend to mislay things when you get to my age.'

The boy had got up. He glanced down at the girl. 'I'm going,' he said. 'Dunno about you, but I'm going.'

She stared at the lacy cloth on the table, the fluted china cup. 'I'll come too.'

'Eh?' said the old woman. 'You're off, are you? That was nice of you to see to my little jobs for me. Tell what's-'er-name to send someone next week if she can, I like having someone young about the place, once in a while, I've got a sympathy with young people. Here – you're forgetting your pretty jacket, Sandra, what's the hurry? 'Bye then, my ducks, see you close my gate, won't you?'

The boy walked ahead, fast; the girl pattered behind him, sliding on the dry grass. At the gateway into the cornfield he stopped. He said, not looking at her, looking towards the **furzy** edge of the wood. 'Christ!'

The wood sat there in the afternoon sun. Wind stirred the trees. Birds sang. There were not, the girl realised, wolves or witches or tigers. Nor were there prowling blokes, gypsy-type blokes. And there were not chattering ghostly voices. Somewhere there were some scraps of metal overlooked by people hunting for souvenirs.

The boy said, 'I'm not going near that old bitch again.' He leaned against the gate, clenching his fists on an iron rung; he shook slightly. 'I won't ever forget him, that poor sod.'

She nodded.

'Two bloody nights. Christ!'

And she would hear, she thought, always, for a long time anyway, that voice trickling on, that soft old woman's voice; would see a tin painted with cornflowers, pretty china ornaments.

'It makes you want to throw up,' he said. 'Someone like that.'

gorse – a
spiky plant

The Darkness Out There by Penelope Lively

between the
chest and waist

She couldn't think of anything to say. He had grown; he had got older and larger. His anger eclipsed his acne, the patches of grease on his jeans, his lardy midriff. You could get people all wrong, she realised with alarm. You could get people wrong and there was a darkness that was not the darkness of tree shadows and murky undergrowth and you could not draw the curtains and keep it out because it was in your head, once known, in your head for ever like lines from a song. One moment you were walking in long grass with the sun on your hair and birds singing and the next you glimpsed darkness, an inescapable darkness. The darkness was out there and it was a part of you and you would never be without it, ever.

She walked behind him, through a world grown unreliable, in which flowers sparkle and birds sing but everything is not as it appears, oh no.