

# The New Village







“But it was the very essence that now impelled him to return to the place where his personality had first been liberated,  
in circumstances extraordinary enough to make them the enduring reality of his life.”

The Green Child *Herbert Read 1935*



# The New Village

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“What are you looking at?”

The rough, uncared-for woodlands that cluster around the built-up residential areas and council estates of post-war Britain are places where dreams and reality are intertwined. They are places of escape, of refuge, and of remnants, where the fears and frustrations of confined lives spill over and drain away. But, there amid the shadows and wandering imaginations, the darkness in people often lingers.

In a recent documentary film about the life and work of Sue Townsend, during an interview not screened before her death, the writer talked for the first time about a disturbing childhood experience from which, she said, she emerged forever changed; suddenly, at the age of eight, being forced to live and think as an adult.

It happened in the woods, in a place near her home in Leicester where she and her friends used to play. On that particular day Sue and two boys had climbed a tree, and from their vantage point, suddenly unable to move or risk a whisper, they looked down to see a man dragging a young girl (whom they knew) to the base of the tree where he strangled her. Later, the three children climbed down the tree and over the girl’s dead body before running to tell a local shopkeeper what had happened. But being from what the writer called ‘the wrong side of the tracks’, the children were thrown out of the shop as liars. The man was later caught and convicted, and in 1953 became the last man to be hanged in Leicester’s Welford Road prison.

Such experiences, the writer suggested, turn us inward. They also make us particularly watchful and aware of atmospheres.



A rough area of woodland bordered the estate I grew up on. It was a peripheral place, close by but oddly remote, like uncharted territory. Its entrance gate lay at the end of a small rectangle of grass between two blocks of flats, a spatial cleft that took you into an even darker place: thick trees, bushes, stinging nettles, and muddy paths winding here and there. A stream always sounded somewhere, though I don't think I ever saw it. Adding to its air of menace, stories about violence in the wood were commonplace. And at least once, I remember, it was the site of an actual murder, a group of boys coming across some body parts scattered through the woods in black plastic bags. The trauma of those young boys left its mark on many children in their orbit, the story soon spreading into the dreams of us all, and then deeper into the local folk memory of my generation, so that years later it was as though I had been there as that first bag was kicked open, the first tear shed, and the first punch thrown in panic and fear.

The wood had seemed to me then like a prison, a labyrinth that drew you inexorably to it. I hated being there, I hated the thought of being there, but to venture in was nevertheless a test of sorts, something I couldn't always shy away from. And getting home again unharmed felt like a kind of victory, not least because I was often chased, having come across the wrong boys, or when fragile loyalties had melted away. In fact it was the intensity of those frantic journeys home I remember most. The dense interior of the wood, the hollows, the clearings, the interlocking paths, the makeshift dens – they all seem like shadowy images to me, not real places at all. But my memory of the route back home is filled with the details and textures of a very particular landscape, one measured in ticking seconds and the heartbeat of a breathless runner:

Patchy, browning grass between the flats

Neon signs and reflections from a row of shops in wintry, late-afternoon light

A hard tarmacked road

Cracks in a concrete footpath

Hands along a rusty chain-link fence – houses on one side, a view across rough, hummocky ground on the other

Jumping over a dumped mattress

Then, off in the distance, a football pitch, always a football pitch; faint shouts and whistles coming through the misty air

Space narrowing now through some old people's homes – the sour scent of cooking

Racing over a bombsite – rubble, bricks and powdery earth

And across another road – parked cars and peeling chrome

Now along a low red-brick wall, a privet hedge; turn in, open the side gate, through it, lock it tight.

Just made it again.



Sometimes I'd see them outside, kicking the wall. Sometimes they'd get bored and file away. Sometimes they'd eventually knock at the door and ask if I was coming out: so-and-so had something for me, they said. I dreamt of being caught of course, in scenes where they'd kick out my teeth before dragging me back to the wood to bury me, or worse. I dreamt of turning into a tree, of becoming green, becoming mud. I dreamt of nothing left but the dark places.

But what would they have really done? More punches, and spitting; or maybe some other humiliation? Would they shove me into the unseen stream and leave me there in the dingy light as they shrieked and circled like quarrelling birds; put me in goal and punish me with penalties until teatime?

Years later, one of the chasers appears in another scene, waiting in a queue at the local post-office. He's a man now, and a father. And with him is his son, about seven. The boy is reeling: bored and agitated, shouting and yanking at the chaser's hand. He pulls away and for a while stands against the door so nobody can enter; then he picks at a rack of postcards, knocking it over. The man does nothing.

Somewhere in front of them in the queue is my mother. She is in her late fifties but, in common with most people of her age on the estate, would have been described as 'elderly'. She had that worn down and fragile look. Like the others, she fought her way through frequent bouts of ill health, but – despite the ingrained stoicism of her class – she was wearied and diminished by it. To make things worse she had been suffering for some time with rheumatoid arthritis and now walked with a stick. My mum was an incredibly kind woman, but quiet and shy. She wasn't unfriendly but at the same time she wouldn't go out of her

way to speak to people; she'd prefer to smile and walk on, her life being full within the family, which was enough. So here she was now, standing with some difficulty in the post-office queue, her discomfort more palpable because, having recently had surgery to remove clusters of varicose veins, each leg was heavily bandaged under her thick stockings.

The young boy, finally reined in and shaken into obedience by his father, had noticed her and stood for a moment staring at her legs. Then, pulling free again, he moved slowly along the queue until he was standing just behind my mother, biting his nails and looking. A second or two later he suddenly kicked at her stick, but it was supporting her full weight and didn't move. She turned and smiled nervously, and maybe she patted the child's head, glancing over at the man, the chaser, and smiling at him too, an entreating look half formed in her expression. Then the child struck again, this time landing a kick on the bandaged calf of her left leg, and as she buckled, he kicked again, harder, at the other. My mother stifled a scream, but stood firm. As the small boy wheeled away and back to where his father stood, burying his face in the man's jeans, people turned and stepped out of the queue to look. My mother was trembling, but not wanting to catch their eyes she attempted a faraway look, as if overcome by the memory of some greater personal tragedy. The atmosphere quickly settled; people murmured their disapproval then went back to waiting. And as the tears slowly found their way down my mother's face and the blood began to seep through the bandages on her legs, imprinting her stockings with a dark-red flood map of the damage, the father, the chaser, fists clenched, said nothing, did nothing.

This is what I know of the story. I had moved away by then and heard of the episode only weeks later. For my parents



it didn't seem important enough to mention, simply an inevitable consequence of civility falling away, part of the more abrasive texture of the times and of a place that had changed around them but which they felt obliged to endure.

As I imagine it now, it's as if I am standing outside looking through the post-office window as the scene unfolds. I see everything and I know what is going to happen, but all I can do is look and do nothing.

And so we grow into the anxious paradox of being both watchful and inward-looking.

It happens in the places where to look intently is a potential insult, where even a glance is an excuse for a confrontation, and all that follows. But when looking is so circumscribed, so discouraged, when it is carried out with such a degree of caution, it becomes highly charged, a finely tuned reaction to being disempowered. The watchful eye develops from a heightened state of awareness and readiness, so even a glimpse becomes enough to register all the information, all the coded signs we need. But under these conditions we also crave those moments when we can languish in looking, when we can watch and see over time and in great detail.

Such conditions, in fact, might be a plausible explanation for a person turning to photography, and for beginning to photograph obsessively. And they might help us begin to understand the photographs in this book.

These pictures were made over a period of fifteen years, a long, slow time of looking and looking again, during which the

photographer John Spinks submitted the village he'd grown up in to a process of revised scrutiny, imposing his own form of watchfulness as a way of coming to terms with the place and the life he'd once led there. But over the years charted invisibly in these pictures, it is as though there is also a question being asked; the insistent undercurrent in the photographs is one of gentle interrogation, and forensic examination. For it seems that in attempting to reconcile himself with the village, Spinks is also in some way calling it to account.

But it would be wrong to see in Spinks's work a 'return of the native' story. Although he moved away, first to college and then to London, he has remained in close contact with this place in North Warwickshire. Family members still live there, and many of the people he knew as a child he still knows; some of them are here in these pictures, staring back at him while, perhaps, wondering about his purpose and sensing that underlying question. Following on from this his portraits rest on a kind of hesitancy, a wariness – perhaps unsurprising in his younger subjects, but it is always there, written on faces and in the language of bodies assembling themselves into a pose. It is there even when it is partly obscured by pride, obstinacy and latent aggression, or when the eyes suggest resilience is waning. In fact in Spinks's encounters with people, that uncertain intensity about looking and being looked at seems ever-present.

The portraits, like August Sander's, are highly individual and representative; also like Sander's work they are a small part of much larger picture – in this case amounting to an archive, assembled over fifteen years and then edited, refined and honed to the essence we see in this book. Throughout, the idea of pictures born from a painstaking process of looking and



looking again over time is overlaid by yet another system of looking as Spinks continually reviews his own pictures, to see what he has seen, to discover details initially lost to the more formal mechanics of making the picture. And if we imagine the act of photographing as something felt as much as seen, a response to the movements and atmospherics of human interaction, then we might begin to recognise this process of reviewing and editing the pictures not only as a search for certain characteristics in the subject but also as a mining of the photographer's own psyche.

It is tempting in this sense to see Spinks's long-term project as an intense psychogeography of place. For example, his pictures of houses (which, as resolutely mute subjects, work more metaphorically than the portraits – particularly in counterpoint to the figures of children) loom as mirrors of something personal and very particular to the photographer, the experiences of past and present converging in the moment he looks at each blank façade, each garden tree. But it is in the woods that we sense conflicted memories and experiences finding their more recognisable spectral shapes.

Tangled woodland spaces have long served as durable metaphors for unspecified human energies and states of mind in modern British art and photography, from the drawings and paintings of Graham Sutherland to the colour photographs of Jem Southam. Typically, with untamed natural forms pushing at the confines of the frame, the inferred physical and psychological conditions of these images suggest a charged act of creation while also opening a channel into the deeper, older resonances of the genius loci. But in Spinks's photographs the regenerative flow of primal energy is almost entirely absent. Instead his woods lie cracked and heavy under the burden of their human presences. Like the work of George

Shaw, whose paintings have depicted a very similar semi-urban, remnant landscape, Spinks's photographs tend to suggest 'something has happened here'. But whereas Shaw creates a hallucinatory drama of absence around the pressing idea of what might have taken place (his scenes are like stages, often with gothic inflections), Spinks plays more quietly to the descriptive, forensic facility of his camera and dwells on what amount to enigmatic and melancholy pieces of evidence. These range from tangible things – half-built or destroyed dens, with their intimations of conflict or abandonment – to places where we are shown merely disturbances in the already random order of the wood; places where the shapes of branches, strangely arched or fallen together, suggest either acts of vandalism or the beginnings of a jagged, rudimentary woodland architecture. And then elsewhere, in more intimate pictures, the clues become no more than passing thoughts; an idea, a barely formed memory surfacing as the photographer pauses to look, for example, at a collection of feathers nestling in a muddy hollow.

So, what has taken place here is always indeterminate. There is no suggestion of a narrative of events; no clear-cut acts of transgression are alluded to. With the attendant portraits representing the public parade of all that is 'outside' – the world of appearances, life as lived – the wood becomes its foil, a kind of inner space, a reservoir for the consciousness of the village, and for its dark imaginings, where plans have been laid, where opportunities have been seized and lost, and where gestures of frustration and longing may have left their mark. And yet the wood in Spinks's photographs is also a fiction, a place shaped only by hopes and fears and alive with things that never happened.

These are the well-trodden paths we have not taken; they are the things beyond us, the things that happened around the periphery of our lives. They are the things we imagined, and also that we couldn't. We have become part of them and they have made us who we are. We were afraid to look, and compelled to look, and now, like some suburban *Angelus Novus*, we will always be looking back even as we are compelled inexorably forward.



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An additional 50 copies of this book are available as a special edition,  
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