

Penny Fields

The village was sleeping when she escaped.

Penny Fields is the kind of village people would drive through regularly, appreciating its preserved charm with nostalgia for a time that never really existed outside of literature.

It was founded in the mid 1400's as a thoroughfare between Brighton and London, in the middle of the Sussex countryside which still sits relatively undisturbed on all sides. At the time, there was one solitary hotel for weary travellers: one refuge for miles around. The solitary hotel from then still stands, the exterior relatively unchanged due to building protection policies. However, the gimmicky interior serves as a stark reminder of the owner's franchise in direct contrast to its outside.

Were you to come through the town now, stopping your car momentarily at the petrol station that provides many of the jobs available in the village today, you might stop to take in the charm. From the petrol station, you could take in the Tudor Row houses, complete with exposed beams and thatched roofs and you would sigh at the sheer cost of the upkeep of those roofs and wish that kind of money on yourself and your family. You might turn to the dominating, but now relatively unused, tudor-style town hall. Perhaps you might notice that the town hall is fake Tudor, designed and built by desperate Georgians to pull people to move to the sleepy town. As you put your card into the self-service payment machine, you'd see the beautiful church steeple looming protectively above the town, visible from all angles. Would you feel a sense of peace at the shared faith on the billboards outside? Or perhaps you would shake your head at the blatant evangelism? Would you even notice, or would the up-lit steeple and gold faced clock draw your attention?

As you pull your car through the town, to continue on your route, you'd see a few cottages on Brighton Road, glancing out to your left you'd spot the dog park and accompanying Pebble Pond. You'd smile and sigh and wish you could live somewhere so idyllic. Before your mind succumbs once again to the monotony of your upcoming chores and conversations.

You would see what almost everyone sees when they make their trip from London to Brighton. But the village is more alive than you'd give it credit for.

You wouldn't think about the graveyard behind the church, the bars full of seedy, unhappy people or the houses, home to real people with real, complex lives. You wouldn't think about the doors to those houses or the secrets they encase.

You certainly wouldn't have seen her from your car. Nor, if you had, would you have thought too much about it. After all, she was just a woman. Tall, unremarkable looking, a little rough around the edges. Her face, contorted in pain, covered in days old make-up. Her highlighted blonde hair shows months of deep brown roots.

Just a woman, standing in the church graveyard, staring at the moon-reflecting river, swaying slightly. She was wearing jeans, dirty and muddied, slightly torn at the heels. She wasn't fully in control of her body. Her bare feet stumbled to keep herself upright. Her hand grabbed out at a delicate, moss covered angel to pull herself back to her feet. The movement pulled at her pastel coloured sleeve to reveal two inches of bruised, cut skin at her wrists. Her breath quickened through her chapped, bleeding lips. And, she screamed: a gurgled, hushed dampened sound escaping her lips.

Her screeches disturbed the sleeping village. Tentative at first, as if she doesn't realise she is allowed to scream. She added more power to her voice, as the lights in nearby houses flicked on. She screamed and began to run, through the church gate. She ran over the bridge to the residential area of Fox Way, crying in a tone

unmistakably begging for help. The bedroom lights flicked on like fairy lights on a Christmas tree.

The village began to wake.

The phone calls to inform the police was not made out of concern for the woman, far from it: Of the 25 phone calls made to the police most were made to inform them of a 'large gathering of people in the middle of the road', several were of 'strange noises coming from the graveyard' and a significant number were to discuss people outside in their pyjamas. It took several minutes for the crowd to gather around the woman, morbid curiosity dragging a number of eager and excited women out of their beds and valiant, testosterone driven men with various collected weapons to protect their neighbourhood.

The woman at the centre of it all could not communicate, although she tried to, her body was shaking uncontrollably from the mid-autumn chill, her bare feet burning from the cold tarmac. What felt like hundreds of eyes, words being sprung at her, questions, raised voices, a scream invaded her space. No-one understood her, no-one would ever understand.

The people pressed closer in.

Mrs. Grey, who had heard of the commotion from several streets away via the village WhatsApp group, swept in with theatrical concern, wrapping the woman in a smothering embrace that had more to do with performance than comfort.

"Oh, you poor dear, you must be freezing. Billy, fetch her a coat from your house."

She said, emphasising her voice and motherly tone as profoundly as she could.

Billy, a prematurely balding, close to middle-age man, nodded enthusiastically and power walked to his home, disappeared inside for a moment before advancing through the crowd to wrap the woman up in it.

The moment Billy's hands stretched out towards her, the woman gave a shriek and threw herself backwards, her hands in front of her face. Landing suddenly on the curb, she drew her knees to her chest and buried her face in her knees, shaking her head intermittently.

Billy, shocked and a little startled at this reaction, turned to the young Mrs. Grey for reassurance.

"Did I do something wrong?" he said, a little hurt.

Daisy Grey, pulled her silk robe tight around herself. The violent reaction of the woman to an act of obvious kindness had made this whole event a lot less endearing and a lot more annoying. If the woman wouldn't allow herself to be looked after, how could Daisy show how caring and loving she was?

Arthur Winter stepped forward then through the gawping crowd, a little old man, with a hefty limp on his left leg that rumour has it was from his time in the military. He limped into the circle and put a calming hand on Billy's arm. His presence instantly easing and reassuring the concerned and excitable crowd.

"It's nothing personal, Billy, I'm sure. This young lady has been in quite a bad place you can see." He said, gesturing to her bruised and scratched wrists and ankles, her cut face and dirtied, messy hair. "She just needs space."

Daisy came swiftly out of her funk then.

"I bet it was a man that did this to her," She piped up. "She can't be near men now. Poor thing." She added, her bottom lip pouting.

"She just needs space." Arthur said slowly. "Can everyone step back for a moment? Someone call the police."

There was a rustle as everyone stepped back, Billy guiding them all, authoritatively. One or two people from the back of the crowd broke off to get their phones. The children from the Jennings house who had been assessing the situation from the

safety of their mothers dressing gown, tiptoed a little forward to get a good look at the 'crazy lady'.

Arthur calmly approached the woman who stared, fixedly at his slippers, her breath ragged and fast.

"Hello." He said, kindly, his voice almost a whisper. "My name is Arthur."

The woman glanced up at Arthur then, quickly before muttering something distinctly Eastern European.

Daisy, taking charge, turned and shouted towards the group. "Someone get Milo, she's Russian."

But, Arthur smiled at the woman, then gestured to the curb next to her.

"I need to sit down. Can I join you?" He rubbed his aching hip and nodded at her pointedly.

The woman tensed up a little more but seemed to steel herself before nodding quickly, and tucking herself once more into a little, rocking ball.

She barely seemed to notice when Arthur lowered himself with a bump onto the curb a few feet from her. But, after a few minutes of the soft, silent, strong man close by, she began to slow her rocking, her breathing began to even out and she started to visibly lean towards him.

The night grew colder, as the excitement seemed to die and the adrenaline of finding a mysterious woman in the town centre dissipated. The Jennings' retrieved their children and people who were less concerned with the woman's safety started feeling the pull of their beds. Arthur stayed, silently by the woman's side. As she shifted more comfortably towards him.

It was Daisy that started the speculations first. She found Isla Jones arriving at the scene and, although the two were not by any means 'close' Daisy found someone close to her age that she could gossip with.

“It's a true mystery, Isla. This woman just turned up out of the blue. Never seen her before in my life. Just started screaming in the middle of the street. I've sent someone to wake Milo up because she can't understand a damn thing we say. Look at her, Isla. She's covered in bruises and dirt. Looks like she just climbed out of a war novel.”

Isla looked down at the woman and pulled her coat tight around her body.

“Poor woman.” She muttered, her jaw tight in what seemed like disgust.

The woman seemed to flinch, burying her face in her arms.

Daisy shook her head enthusiastically. “Look at her wrists. It looks like someone's tied her up. Ligature marks they call it.” She nodded, knowingly.

“See that on CSI did you, Daisy?” Isla said.

Daisy chose not to answer that question and looked Isla up and down, her Detective mind spinning. “Where have you come from all dressed like that?”

Isla tried to pull her coat tighter, her leather jacket doing very little to conceal the sparkly black dress underneath.

“I was at a club tonight.”

“On a Wednesday!” Daisy exclaimed, thrilled. “Aren't you the party animal? I used to be like that before I met Walter. Now I'm this boring married woman.”

“Hardly boring, Daisy.” Isla said, her gaze fixed on the cowering woman, now inches from touching Arthur, still tight in a ball.

“Where do you reckon she came from, Isla? I reckon she came home with a man and a sex game went horribly wrong and he died on top of her and she had to escape.”

“Things like that don't happen in towns like this, Daisy.” Isla brushed it off.

But, Billy was hooked on the story he was eavesdropping on:

“He had her tied up for a game and she had to run out?” He said, raptured.

“Or, it could have been kidnap.” She said, lost in her little fantasy world. “She was going for a walk in the park when a man jumped out at her, tied her up and was taking her to London when she broke her bonds, escaped the truck and ran to us for sanctuary.”

By now, Daisy’s stories were gathering more focus from the crowd than Arthur and his silent friend on the curb. People’s own speculations were travelling around the group, whispered between friends, received on messenger, gossiped about on the Facebook Community Page. Ideas were flying.

She was a prisoner of war, a spy, taken by and escaped from the British Government and calling the police was only going to get her killed eventually.

She was a victim of Alien Abduction, dropped to earth in a random part of the world by curious but strange extraterrestrial beings.

She had never seen the light of day before and had been raised by scientists in a lab.

She was a masochist that gave these marks to herself in some weird fetish fantasy.

She was haunted, possessed and depressed. She was from Russia, Portugal,

Lithuania, the USSR, she could really speak English but was choosing not to.

But all the theories agreed, she was the most interesting thing to happen to Penny Fields in decades.

The police and an ambulance arrived, took charge and checked her over with efficient delicate ease. All the while the woman clung to Arthur for support. Daisy watched in jealousy as she had desired very much to be the one the woman clung to, but she had still saved the day, she reasoned to herself.

The arrival of the police called more people out of their homes, some also peering through drawn curtains in the warmth of their own home, safe to speculate to each other in privacy.

The policeman radioed the incident in, calling for translators while the attending officer tried to gently look at the woman's bruised and bitten wrists, but one of the woman's hands gripped vice-like on Arthur's arms. The paramedics had wrapped her up, checked her over and given her a useless amount of Oxygen to support her breathing.

"She was found here at the side of the road?" the policewoman asked Arthur. "Do you know her?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. From what I know, she was just wandering around aimlessly."

"She has to go to the hospital, we need to check her over completely." The paramedic stated, business-like at the end of his shift. "Do you want to come, she clearly likes you?"

Arthur glanced at the woman, wide-eyed on the seat next to him, her knuckles turning white with effort of gripping to his blue dressing gown sleeve. He nodded, smiling at her.

"I'll come."

The paramedics shared information with the police officers, strapped the woman and Arthur into the van and shut them both inside with a heavy clunk of the doors.

The police were interviewing the town in a half-hearted way, hearing the same facts from each of them and different speculations from everyone.

"Obviously, she's been abused by someone." Daisy was telling a policeman, her robe parting distractingly at her chest despite the freezing air. Probably escaped from the trunk of a car on the way to London."

The policeman finished writing, seemingly unaware of her cleavage dangerously close to him. He closed his notebook and tucked it in his vest. He raised an eyebrow at Daisy, and looked around at the silent, eavesdropping crowd.

“Honestly, that’s unlikely.” He said more than he should. But, feeling the first taste of excitement he had felt since joining the Rural Sussex Police, he continued. “What you’ve got is the symptom of something more. I’d be surprised if she was the only woman in her situation. And it’s probably not a London problem. She didn’t walk far with her feet bare like that. Let’s be honest. She came from a place right here. She’s been held against her will from somewhere in this town.”

The people of Penny Field looked around at their friends and neighbours. Knowing that what the policeman was insinuating was indeed the most likely. Somewhere in the idyllic, picturesque village, a woman had been held, tortured and worse. She had been there, behind the closed doors of the houses, so close to all of them. Every individual felt the understanding, the responsibility of the woman’s experience. It took a few moments of self-reflection before the thought spread around the group: Someone in the neighbourhood had hurt this woman. Someone they knew, shared barbecues with, someone they sat next to church, someone was insidious.

Very quickly, every person present in the glowing morning light that day, shared a collective thought: They did not want to know. The idea that their friend, relative, neighbour had been harbouring a secret like this was too horrendous a thought for them to comprehend.

As the crowd dispersed, awkwardly, silently; the sun began to rise, soft pastel colours adorning the autumn sky.

Some people would follow the investigation for the next few weeks, some would even dig into the secrets of the town, trying to unearth the person responsible. After a time, even they began to quiet, and the investigation went dead.

After the mistake of that night, Isla Jones was far more careful when housing her victims on their commute into London, and no more escaped. Communications were

tightened, people responsible were killed and beaten, defeated women continued to trickle into the capital at a steady pace.

Over time, events of that night dispersed into fragments of a collective memory. And the town of Penny Fields kept its secrets.