

no one was looking. Down the garden she went, along the mown path.

There was a rustle by the compost heap, a ripple through the long grass. Lob was there. Lucy couldn't see him, but she knew he was pleased and boastful, full of pride in the glory of the garden and its harvest, his work well done. He darted and scurried and skittered ahead and alongside, he chivvied her from behind. Lucy laughed, and pretended to be frightened.

She crossed the stream, treading carefully on the stepping stones. It would be too cold to fall in now.

Knowing she shouldn't, she took the leafy path into the woods, and stood in the thick of the trees. No one knows where I am, she thought: only Lob.

And there was a deliciousness about that, salted with fear. She could run back, if she wanted. In the kitchen the light was on behind drawn curtains; Dad was washing up, and Granny Annie putting things away. Or had they finished now? Would they come looking for her?

The gap between indoors and out, tameness and wildness, lightness and dark, stretched wide and wider in the flittery dusk. Lucy didn't want to go in, not yet. Stars were pricking the sky, tree branches stretching out to muffle them.

It was colder than she'd realized. A thorn snagged her sleeve. As she tried to free herself, her foot sank into soft mud. She jumped back as a

stinging nettle seared her wrist. Perhaps she didn't like it here after all, not on her own. Where was he? Where was Lob?

A face was looking down at her, a face in the trees – a gnarled, knobbled, grizzled face. It scowled and grimaced, but no, that couldn't be Lob. Lob was farther on, laughing at her for being scared. He dared her to go on.



But I won't, Lucy decided. He'd get her into trouble. It was all right for Lob; he didn't have to think about getting told off, or being lost in the dark. She pulled her foot out of the mud with a *plotch*, and began feeling her way back to the stepping stones. Which way? This way? Or was that farther into the wood?

'Lucy?' came Grandpa's voice, through the trees.

'Lucy-Lu?' called Dad's. And she saw the bobbing light of a torch beam.



‘I’m here!’ she shouted back, trying to sound brave.

And by the time they reached her, she’d crossed the stream and was back in the orchard, pretending not to have been far.

Dad was cross with her for going out in the dark on her own. She didn't make excuses, didn't try to blame it on Lob or on anyone but herself.

'You're all right,' Grandpa said, but she heard the shakiness in his voice, as if he was the one who'd been frightened. Indoors, he made hot chocolate for everyone.

Lucy was glad to be back by the warmth of the fire, but she hugged to herself the thrill of being out in the dark, with Lob and the trees and the stars. Her wrist burned with the sting of the nettle.

'What's Lob made of?' she asked Grandpa, on the last morning, while they were eating breakfast.