

I didn't mean to sleep practically a whole day and a night but I did. And when I woke up I thought how strange it was to be lying in someone else's bed thousands of miles from home surrounded by grayish light and a weird kind of quiet that you never get in New York City where the traffic keeps you company in a constant buzzy way day and night.

The first thing I did was to check my phone for messages, but all it said was NO NETWORK and I thought Oh boy so much for civilization and felt a little freaked out and thought of that movie where they say No One Can Hear You Scream. But then I went over to the window and looked out and there was the slightest bit of pink light over to one side where the sun must have just started coming up and a totally quiet gray mist hung over the barn and the gardens and the fields and everything was perfectly still and beautiful and I stared and stared expecting to see a deer or maybe a unicorn trotting home after a hard night but I didn't see anything except some birds.

After a while I was cold and got back under the blankets.

I felt too shy to come out of my room, so I stayed there and thought about my old home which unfortunately led to thinking about Davina the Diabolical, who sucked my father's soul out through his you know what and then got herself knocked up with the devil's spawn which, when it pops out, Leah and I are going to call Damian even if it's a girl.

According to my best friend Leah, D the D would have liked to poison me slowly till I turned black and swelled up like a pig and died in agony but I guess that plan flopped when I refused to eat anything and in the end she got me sent off to live with a bunch of cousins I'd never met a few thousand miles away while she and Dad and the devil's spawn went on their merry way. If she was making even the slightest attempt to address centuries of bad press for stepmothers, she scored a Big Fat Zero.

Before I could work myself up into a full-blown attack of hyperventilating, I heard a tiny noise at the door and there was Piper again, looking in, and when she saw I was awake she gave a little happy squeak like a mouse cheer and asked Did I want a cup of tea?

OK, I said, and then Thank you, remembering to be polite, and I smiled at her because I still liked her from yesterday. And off she drifted just like the fog on little cat feet.

I went to the window again and looked out and saw the mist had cleared and everything was so green and then I put some clothes on and managed to find the kitchen after discovering some pretty amazing rooms by mistake, and Isaac and Edmond were there eating marmalade on toast and Piper was making my tea and seeming worried that I'd had to get out of bed to get it. In New York, nine-year-olds usually don't do this kind of thing, but wait for some grown-up to do it for them, so I was impressed by her intrepid attitude but also kind of wondering if good old Aunt Penn had died and no one could figure out a good way to tell me.

Mum was working all night, said Edmond, so she's gone to bed but she'll be up for lunch and then you'll see her.

Well that answered that, thank you Edmond.

While I drank my tea I could see Piper squirming around wanting to tell me something and she kept looking at Edmond and Isaac who just looked back and at last she said Please come to the barn Daisy. And the Please was more like a command than a request, and then she gave her brothers a look like, I couldn't help it! And when I got up to go with her she did the nicest thing, which was to hold my hand and it made me want to hug her, especially since Being

Nice to Daisy hadn't been anyone's favorite hobby lately.

In the barn, which smelled like animals but in a nice way, she showed me a tiny black and white goat with square eyes and little stubby horns and a bell around its neck on a red collar and said his name was Ding and he was her goat but I could have him if I wanted and then I did hug her because Piper and the sweet baby goat were exactly as nice as each other.

Then she showed me a bunch of sheep with long tangly coats and some chickens that lay blue eggs and she found one in the straw that was still warm and gave it to me and even though I didn't know what to do with an egg straight from a chicken's bottom I thought it was a nice thing to do.

I can't wait to tell Leah about this place.

After a while I was feeling pretty shivery and told Piper that I had to lie down for a little while and she frowned at me and said You need to eat something because you look too thin and I said Christ Piper don't you start it's only jet lag, and she looked hurt but Jesus, that old broken record is one I don't need to hear from people I hardly even know.

When I got up again there was soup and cheese and a huge loaf of bread in the kitchen and Aunt Penn was there and when she saw me she came right up and put her arms around me and then stood back and looked at my face and just said Elizabeth, like it was the end of a sentence, and then after a while, You look just like your mother, which was obviously a gross exaggeration since she was beautiful and I'm not. Aunt Penn has the same eyes as Piper, all serious and watching you, and when we sat down to lunch she didn't give me any soup or anything but just said Please Daisy, help yourself to whatever you'd like.

I told them all about Dad and Davina the Diabolical and Damian the devil's spawn and they laughed but you could tell they felt kind of sorry for me, and Aunt Penn said Well Their Loss is Our Gain, which was nice even if she was just being polite.

I tried to study her without being too obvious because I was hoping to get some kind of clue from the way she looked and acted about the mother I barely ever got a chance to meet. She made a point of asking me lots of questions about my life and listened very carefully to the answers like she was trying to figure something out about me but not in the way most adults do, pretending to listen while thinking about something else.

She asked how my father was and said she hadn't seen him in many years and I told her he was fine except for his taste in girlfriends which was totally un-fine, but he was probably feeling lots better now that I wasn't around reminding him about it day and night.

She smiled a funny kind of smile just then like she was trying to keep from laughing or maybe crying, and when I looked at her eyes I could see she was on my side which as far as I'm concerned made a nice change and I guess had something to do with my mother being her younger sister who died.

There was a fair amount of arguing and talking at lunch and except for talking to me she didn't get too involved but kind of observed, and overall I'd have to say that the main feeling you got from her was that she was a little distracted, I suppose because of the work she was doing.

A little later when all the others were talking she put her hand on my arm and said in a low voice just to me that she wished my mother were here to see how I'd turned into such a vivid person and I thought Vivid? that's a pretty strange word to choose, and I wondered if what she actually meant to say was Screwed Up. But then again maybe not because she didn't seem like the type to sit around thinking up ways to be bitchy, unlike some people I know.

After looking at me for a few seconds more she put her hand up very gently and pushed

the hair off my face in a way that for some reason made me feel incredibly sad and then she said in a regretful grave voice that she was sorry but she had to give a lecture in Oslo at the end of the week on the Imminent Threat of War and had work to do so would I please excuse her? She would only be gone a few days in Oslo and the children would take good care of me. And I thought There's that old war again, popping up like a bad penny.

I didn't spend much time thinking about the war because I was bored with everyone jabbering on for about the last five years about Would There Be One or Wouldn't There and I happen to know there wasn't anything we could do about it anyway so why even bring the subject up.

It was when I was thinking things like this that I sometimes noticed Edmond looking at me in his odd, listening kind of way and sometimes I looked back at him doing the same expression myself just to see what he'd say. But mostly he just smiled and half closed his eyes and looked more like Wise Dog than ever and I thought to myself If this kid turns out to be thirty-five I won't be a bit surprised.

So that was pretty much all that happened on my first conscious day in England, and so far I was finding Life With My Cousins more than OK and a huge improvement over my so-called life at home on Eighty-sixth Street.

Late that night I heard the phone ring somewhere in the house and I wondered if it was my father calling to say Hey I made a mistake sending my only daughter away to another country because of some scheming harpy's ruthless whims, but by that time I was too sleepy to bother getting up and wandering around looking for a keyhole to listen at. So as you can see, that old country air must be doing me tons of good already.

5

Early the next morning I was strolling around as usual in my unpleasantly populated subconscious when I heard Edmond's voice very close to my ear saying Daisy Wake Up! And there was his face right near mine and a burning cigarette in one hand and some kind of striped Turkish slippers on his feet, and he said Come on we're going fishing.

And I forgot to say I hate fishing, and fish too now that you mention it, and instead pulled myself out from under my blankets and put on some clothes without washing or anything and next thing I knew Edmond and Isaac and Piper and I were sitting in the jeep and bumping down a bumpy old road and the sun was streaming in the windows and it felt much nicer than usual to be alive even if it meant a bunch of fish were going to have to die.

Edmond was driving with the rest of us crammed into the front seat and not wearing

seat belts because there weren't any and Piper singing a song I'd never heard before with a funny jagged melody and her voice as pure as an angel.

We got to a place by a river and parked the jeep and got out and Isaac carried all the fishing stuff, and Edmond brought lunch and a blanket to lie on and although the day wasn't very warm, I made a nest for myself by trampling down a little patch in the tall grass and put the blanket down and lay very still and as the sun rose up in the sky I warmed up even more and all I could hear was the sound of Edmond talking in a steady low stream of conversation to the fish, and Piper singing her odd song, and the occasional splash of the river or a bird rising into the air near us and singing its heart out.

I was thinking about almost nothing except that bird and then Edmond was next to my ear whispering Skylark, and I just nodded, knowing it was futile to ask how he knew the answers to questions you hadn't even got around to asking yet. Then he handed me a hot cup of tea from the thermos and disappeared again back to the fishing.

No one caught much of anything, except Piper who caught a trout and threw it back (Piper always throws fish back, said Edmond, and Isaac said nothing as usual). I couldn't have been happier as long as I didn't sit up because there was a coldish wind, so I lay there all dreamy and thought about Aunt Penn, and my life so far, and got a little bit of a flashback of what it was like to be happy.

It was times like this when I let my guard down for something like half a nanosecond, that Mom had a habit of strolling into my brain. Even though she was dead, which made people put on this sickening pious kind of face and say Oh I'm SO sorry, like it was their fault and in fact if everyone wasn't so busy apologizing all the time about asking a perfectly normal question like Where's your mother? I might have managed to get more information out of someone than just She Died To Give You Life, which is the party line on Good Old Mom.

It's a shame, starting out your first day on the planet as a murderer but there you go, I didn't have much choice at the time. Still, I could live quite happily without the labels I picked up because of it. Murderer or Poor Motherless Lamb.

Which one would you choose, the rock or the hard place?

Dad was one of those Never Mention Her Name Again type of fathers which if you ask me was extremely un-psychologically correct of him. Leah's father worked on Wall Street and shot himself one day when he lost \$600 million of someone else's money and they never shut up about him in their house. Which, as Leah likes to point out, is not the perfect answer either.

I sometimes wished someone would just fill me in on the simple boring things like did she have big feet or wear makeup and what was her favorite song and did she like dogs or have a nice voice and what books did she read etc. I made up my mind to ask Aunt Penn some of these questions when she came back from Oslo but I guess what you really want to know are the things you can't ask like Did she have eyes like yours and When you pushed my hair back was that what it feels like to have your mother do it and Did her hands look serious and quiet like yours and Did she ever have a chance to look at me with a complicated expression like the one on your face, and by the way Was she scared to die.

Then Edmond and Piper came and lay down on the blanket, one on either side of me with Piper holding my hand as usual and Isaac still standing in the water looking peaceful and they started arguing about what flies trout liked best in a quiet lazy sort of way, and Edmond blew smoke rings in the air and I closed my eyes and wished they were mine.