

I'm thinking now would be a good time to talk about Isaac because he's the one who gets left out of most of the action due to hardly ever saying a word but I'm starting to realize it's the ones who aren't yakking all the time who sometimes turn out to be worth keeping an eye on.

At first I barely noticed him what with noticing Edmond so much and Piper holding my hand all the time and chickens clucking, dogs barking, sheep baaing, not to mention half the world blowing up and the pipes banging night and day. So it took me longer than usual to get the picture that while Piper and Edmond were busy watching over me, Isaac was busy watching over them.

He didn't do it in an obvious way like Osbert who was always pushing himself into the conversation with superior information and making it clear that he was the one with Family Responsibilities which Frankly Exhausted Him and He'd Rather Not Be Bothered only Seeing As How He Was the Eldest, Well, deep sigh.

Edmond on the other hand was totally up-front even if he did surprise you in about half a million ways each day. When Edmond was listening in to your thoughts, you could tell by looking at him looking at you.

Isaac was more shadowy and Kept His Counsel, as my doorman used to say about anyone who didn't like to gossip. This doesn't mean there was anything sneaky about his way of watching, or anything sentimental either. He just accepted the things people did, without comment or judgment and maybe without being terribly concerned. Even his family seemed to interest him in an abstract way, like lab specimens he'd come to feel responsibility and affection for.

At times I thought he was more animal than human. For instance if you were walking in town on market day and there were tons of people milling around, you would never have to worry about losing him in the crowd even if you totally forgot he was there and got separated for ages. You could zig and zag and make turns on a sudden whim and stop for tea and cut across a few back streets and decide that today would be a good time to do something totally different and try that bakery that none of you normally went to when in actual fact you had plenty of bread already at home so there'd be no reason to be in a bakery at all, and the next time you looked up Isaac would be right at your elbow, totally casual, like he'd been there all along or possibly just followed your train of thought through the crowd.

It was like he understood humans objectively and could see your entire life stretching out in both directions including whether you were going to make a detour to the bakery and which one and when.

With nonhumans he was completely different. With a dog or horse or badger or fox every fiber of his being was totally engaged. Even his face was different around animals, with the expression of polite distance he always wore for humans replaced by something concentrated and alive.

They knew it too. You could search hours for a pregnant cat and Isaac would tell you to Look under the hedge felt in the garden shed and there she'd be with five kittens, probably already having told him what each one was named. Piper said people used to borrow him when they went to buy a new dog because he could always see if something wasn't quite right just by looking, or if it was the type to savage your new baby to death on a whim.

You might wonder, as I did, what a dog or a sheep had to say to a person like Isaac

that's so interesting but I guess he might have said the same thing about a foreign life-form like me. What have I ever said that's so riveting to anyone but myself?

Shrinks don't count.

They listen for cash.

Today there was a knock on the door and it turned out to be two bored-looking men from the Council coming to register us and Determine our Medical and Nutritional Exigencies which turned out to mean did any of us have appendicitis or scurvy?

They had a list about as thick as a phone book with names and addresses and some were checked off and some crossed out and there were hundreds of question marks scattered around the pages and boy did you ever get the sense that they wished they'd asked a few more questions before signing up for this job.

After finding Aunt Penn on the list and putting a bunch of x's and a question mark by her name and asking a few official-type questions, they asked to speak to our guardian and seemed fairly taken aback to discover that the closest we had to a grown-up on the premises was Osbert.

But seeing as how there wasn't much they could do about our situation short of filing an official report that no one would ever notice or read or care about, they decided to stick to the questions they'd asked everyone else for miles around like, Were any of the animals on the farm kept for food? Osbert said the sheep were very rare and kept for breeding and wool and for selling on to other farms, and the goats were pets but the hens were all layers which struck me as funny because after that all I could think of was layers and layers of hens.

Then they asked for everyone's names and ages and Osbert said that I was their American cousin and they looked even more confused and wanted to see my passport and then asked lots of questions about Dad and what was he doing sending his only daughter away from home at a time like this and I said Well don't think that question hasn't occurred to me too.

Then they both looked at me with the evil eye I seem to get from just about everyone these days and asked if we had enough money for food, and Osbert explained that we had some money in his mother's account and the men said, We'll do what we can for you, and added that it wasn't definite but rationing would probably start any day now due to the embargoes, and school was closing early for summer holidays and we should stay off the roads. Like hanging around on the roads was the world's best entertainment.

We asked them what was going to happen next and how long they thought the war would last but by the totally blank looks they gave us in return you got the sense none of these questions had occurred to them before.

Well it was reassuring to know that local government was taking an interest, but their visit didn't exactly cause any radical changes to our lifestyle since for the last few days we'd mostly been hanging around wondering what to do next, broken up by trips to town where we had to wait in line for hours listening to people's gossip about what was Really Going On. The short answer if you ask me was that nobody had the slightest clue but it sure didn't stop them from pretending they did.

People who had friends or friends of friends who had managed to get phone calls or e-mails through said that London Was Occupied and there were tanks and soldiers in the streets and fire and anarchy all around. Supposedly the hospitals were filled to bursting with all the people who'd been poisoned or bombed and everyone was fighting over food and drinkable water.

One crazy old man kept whispering to anyone who would listen that the BBC had been taken over by Malign Forces and that we shouldn't believe anything we heard on The Wireless but his wife rolled her eyes and said he was still worried about the Germans from last time around.

Everyone tried to look like they knew all about all the news already, or that they had Much More Recent Information but weren't At Liberty to give it away. I saw expressions on people's faces that I'd never seen before, something like anxiety and superiority and paranoia all mixed up in one polite grimace.

Each day we'd walk down the hill to the village and hang around in a line outside the village shop waiting for our turn to get inside and choose a few essentials. For some reason it reminded me of Supermarket Sweep which I'd always wanted to go on, only there wasn't much in the way of food and you weren't allowed to run around stuffing as much as possible into bags.

The worst part was having to listen to everyone's crackpot theories and there was no hope you could pretend to be deaf due to it being such a small town and everybody knowing everything about you.

Here's the sort of thing we'd hear, all in low hushed tones especially when us Children were around, and if it doesn't sound so bad to you try playing it on an endless loop while you listen and smile politely until your cheeks go into spasm and you develop a twitch:

1. My brother-in-law says it's the French bastards.
2. My friend in Chelsea said the looting is terrible and she got the most amazing wide-screen TV.
3. My neighbor in The Lords says it's the Chinese.
4. Have you noticed that no Jews have been killed?
5. There's a nuclear bunker under Marks & Spencer that's only open to shareholders.
6. People are eating their pets.
7. The Queen is Bearing Up.
8. The Queen is Breaking Down.
9. The Queen is one of Them.

You can imagine it was the social event of the day, everyone competing for the worst piece of news.

One of the couples who lived in London but had a weekend house near the village were here for The Duration, saying that they had two kids and a purebred Bouvier des Flandres, which turns out to be a dog, and they figured it would be a whole lot safer here than in London. Well they were probably right about it being safer if you didn't count the locals who were suddenly getting all Them and Us all over the place. So far it was fairly civilized but you could see that under the surface everyone hated those people and their fancy French-sounding dog and were just waiting for a chance to get even when the food ran out.

A lot of worried families asked if we needed a place to stay because of Aunt Penn being gone but it was obvious they didn't really want us even if we'd wanted them, which we didn't. Sometimes when we said No thank you, they looked so relieved we couldn't help feeling a little hurt.

As every day passed you could see the panic on more and more people's faces, and the rest carefully composed their features to look somber and made clucking noises and said How Awful It Was. But once we were away from them we actually felt pretty cheerful and laughed on the walk back to the house, partly to cheer Piper up and partly because it still felt like an adventure and because the sun was shining and it was a beautiful walk, war or no war.

I was desperate to tell Leah about all this stuff and how totally great it was to have no grown-ups around telling you what to do all the time. Not that I went around saying that out loud, but let's face it. No matter how much you put on a sad expression and talked about how awful it was that all those people were killed and what about democracy and the Future of Our Great Nation the fact that none of us kids said out loud was that WE DIDN'T REALLY

CARE. Most of the people who got killed were either old like our parents so they'd had good lives already, or people who worked in banks and were pretty boring anyway, or other people we didn't know.

Osbert and his friends from school said they thought it would be amazing to live in London and be spies and duck around the enemy trying to get information and I thought, Right, Osbert and a bunch of his snotty schoolboy friends would be the first people I'd fall back on to save the nation if I happened to be Prime Minister.

Later that day I found Edmond in the lower barn feeding the animals and I played with Ding while he milked the goats. Ding was as nice as a puppy and would just butt you politely with his head until you rubbed his ears and then he'd stand there in a kind of trance with his eyes closed leaning on you more and more the more you rubbed and if you stepped away he'd fall over.

After a while we took the milk back to the house and it started to rain and Edmond and I went and sat in my room and he smoked and we talked about lots of things and he asked me all sorts of questions that usually drive me insane like why I didn't eat much.

For some reason I didn't get mad at him for asking, and I really tried to explain about at first not wanting to get poisoned by my stepmother and how much it annoyed her and how after a while I discovered I liked the feeling of being hungry and the fact that it drove everyone stark raving mad and cost my father a fortune in shrinks and also it was something I was good at.

He didn't look at me while I was talking, but after a few minutes he lay back and let his knee rest against my knee and I got another one of those feelings you're not supposed to get from your cousin and I wondered very quietly to myself What Was Happening Here but of course it doesn't matter how quietly you wonder things when Edmond is listening. It takes a whole lot of practice to get used to being careful about what you think in the privacy of your own brain. On the other hand, there are advantages in being able to think something that you can count on being overheard. It eliminates a lot of fumbling around.

Do you ever think about dying? Edmond asked me, talking on a tangent.

And I said Yes, all the time but mostly as a way of making other people feel guilty.

And he didn't say anything but when, a lot later, I went over the conversation in my head I realized I never asked him the same question back.

We were quiet for the longest time just listening to the rain on the window with his leg resting against mine and a feeling flying between us in a crazy jagged way like a bird caught in a room. The feeling which had been starting up for a while now was so strong it made me dizzy and so far we'd just been pretending it was what cousinly love felt like and all that garbage you tell yourself when you want to pretend something's not really happening.

After some more time I tried an experiment by thinking something very very quietly to myself, and then nothing happened for ages, Edmond just lay there with his eyes closed and I felt a little disappointed and a little relieved all at the same time and then just as I was moving on to other things in my head, he propped himself up on one elbow and looked at me with a little half-smile and then kissed me on the mouth so gently and sweetly, and then we kissed again, only not quite so sweetly.

And after a little while of this my brain and my body and every single inch of me that was alive was flooded with the feeling that I was starving, starving, starving for Edmond.

And what a coincidence, that was the feeling I loved best in the world.

It would be much easier to tell this story if it were all about a chaste and perfect love between Two Children Against the World at an Extreme Time in History but let's face it that would be a load of crap.

The real truth is that the war didn't have much to do with it except that it provided a perfect limbo in which two people who were too young and too related could start kissing without anything or anyone making us stop. There were no parents, no teachers, no schedules. There was nowhere to go and nothing to do that would remind us that this sort of thing didn't happen in the Real World. There no longer *was* any Real World.

For a while Edmond and I pretended that what was happening between us was totally reversible. We drifted around through the day not looking at each other and acting like nothing at all had happened.

But it didn't matter. It turns out to be true that an Object in Motion Remains in Motion. Well thank you, Miss Valerie Greene, science teacher back at dear old Nightingale-Bamford School for Girls. Whoever imagined anything you said would ever come in handy?

Now let's try to understand that falling into sexual and emotional thrall with an underage blood relative hadn't exactly been on my list of Things to Do while visiting England, but I was coming around to the belief that whether you liked it or not, Things Happen and once they start happening you pretty much just have to hold on for dear life and see where they drop you when they stop.

In our case, Things Happened in spades.

The next thing that happened was we started sleeping most of the daylight hours so we could be awake at night when everyone else was in bed. Of course if you had to choose an audience for illicit love based on the people you'd least like to have hanging around, Piper and Isaac would win hands down. Isaac because he always knew by a sort of navigational instinct where Edmond was and what he was thinking, in case it wasn't totally obvious anyway just by looking at us. And Piper because she was so good and pure that when she was confused about what was going on she just stood and stared at your face until you either told her the truth or ran away and hid. Neither of us was anxious to tell her the truth so most of the time we hid.

Things were so intense I was sure that other people could hear the hum coming off us. Piper and Isaac didn't say anything but the dogs were upset and behaved strangely, as if the hum and the smell of our skin made them anxious. Gin refused to leave Edmond's side, wrapping herself around his legs when he tried to go anywhere, and crawling up into his armpit whenever he sat down as if she wanted to hide herself inside him. It got so bad that he had to be stroking her all the time or she'd start whining piteously until Osbert shouted from the other room Will someone make that dog shut up!

Some nights Edmond had to lock her in the barn if we wanted to be alone but secretly I felt desperate for her because I knew exactly how she felt.

Osbert was the only one who didn't seem suspicious. He was so interested in the Decline of Western Civilization that he missed the version of it taking place under his nose.

We didn't hear anything from Aunt Penn. It had been a few weeks since she left and every moment of every day felt like some bizarre new existence in which Not Hearing from

Aunt Penn fit perfectly. You could tell Piper missed her mother and there were things I still wanted to ask her but aside from that her arrival right now in the middle of the world's most inappropriate case of sexual obsession would have been inconvenient to say the least.

As for me? I was pretty far gone, but not so far gone that I thought anyone with half a toe hold in reality would think what we were doing was a good idea.

But I would like to make an important point before this goes any further and that is if anyone feels like arresting me for corrupting an innocent kid then all I can say is that Edmond was *not corruptible*. Some people are just like that and if you don't believe me it just means you've never met one of them yourself.

Which is your loss.