

It was now five weeks since the war started.

Pretty much every day we heard about more bombs. The airports stayed closed and occasionally the electricity would sputter and go off. All the usual sources of information including e-mail and cell phones were much too slow and unreliable to be of any use and there was no television to speak of. According to Osbert you could try to send e-mails but they'd bounce back at you for no particular reason and the same with text messages. And sometimes they'd get where they were going, but not in the form you'd sent them. And sometimes you couldn't get anything like a dial tone for hours at a time and in the end it was easier just to give up and read a book.

None of this bothered me too much since no one ever tried to call me but I guess it made Osbert nervous because it was getting harder and harder to stay in touch with his spy-crazy friends who spent their lives organizing illicit jaunts down to the pub for exchanges of information. Though they practiced looking grim, in fact they couldn't have been happier waiting for the real action to get going so they could smoke out collaborators and look danger in the eye while carrying messages across enemy lines. We've all seen the movies.

Then just when we got used to our new life and our daily walk to town and waiting hours for a couple of loaves of bread and half a pound of butter and four pints of milk (because we're children) the whole countryside was quarantined due to an outbreak of smallpox or should I say an Alleged Outbreak of Smallpox because these days we didn't know what was true and what wasn't, and Osbert and the Food Queue were virtually our only sources of information since even the voices on the radio sounded strange and when you could manage to tune in to them you didn't know who they were or whether they were telling you the truth, and there were no newspapers and the phone lines were dead more often than not.

Anyhow, the upshot of the so-called Smallpox Epidemic was that you weren't supposed to be out on the streets at all and now big black trucks went around and left bags of food twice a week at the end of the drive, and if you had any special requests you could write them on a piece of paper.

We thought this was pretty funny for a while, and wrote things like chocolate and sausages and cake and Coca-Cola on our list and then Piper got mad at us because she was the one who did most of the cooking and there were things she really needed, and all our stupid requests were getting in the way of them noticing that what we really needed was flour. Not that they paid any attention to our list anyway. We got what we got.

So OK, there was smallpox. But because everything was getting worse by little daily increments and you didn't know what was true or not true it seemed easier just to treat this news as another fact of life and nothing particularly to worry about.

Think about it. It's May in the middle of the English Countryside. And everyone's saying It's the most beautiful May we've had in years and Isn't it ironic? From my point of view this made any doomsday scenario even harder to get my head around, especially having grown up in the Concrete Jungle, which possibly overstates the case given that the Upper West Side is fairly leafy, as concrete jungles go. But we're still talking about a few nice trees here and there whereas in England I was drowning in fertility. And although there were tons of rumors coming from every direction, nothing THAT BAD seemed to be happening to any of US.

Meanwhile about 100,000 white roses all over the front of the house are blooming like mad, the vegetables grow about six inches a day, and the flower gardens all around the house are so full of color that you couldn't help feeling ecstatic and dizzy just looking at them. According to one of Isaac's rare speeches, the birds were happier with the invasion than they'd been in years since no one was driving cars or farming or doing anything much to disturb them, so all they did was lay eggs and sing and try to avoid getting eaten by foxes.

It was getting to be like Walt Disney on Ecstasy outside the house what with squirrels and hedgehogs and deer wandering around with the ducks and dogs and chickens and goats and sheep and if anyone looked totally disoriented by this whole war thing it was them.

Piper and Edmond and Isaac and I used to watch this lunatic fringe milling around every day around sunset and then Edmond and I would slip away up to the tiny bedroom at the top of the house or the big storage closet under the eaves or the lambing barn or one of about a thousand places we'd found where we could try and try and try to get enough of each other but it was like some witch's curse where the more we tried to stop being hungry the more starving we got.

It was the first time in as long as I could remember that hunger wasn't a punishment or a crime or a weapon or a mode of self-destruction.

It was simply a way of being in love.

Sometimes I thought hours had passed when really it was minutes. Sometimes we fell asleep and then woke up to finish where we'd left off. Sometimes I felt like I was being consumed from within like a person with one of those freak diseases where you digest your own stomach. And sometimes we had to stop, just because we were raw and exhausted and still humming humming humming with something we didn't even have the strength left to do anything about.

Then we would sleep for a little while and eventually reappear and try to act normal which meant things like helping Piper search for honeycomb or dandelion leaves or spending a few hours weeding the vegetable garden. All the sunshine meant there were vegetables earlier than there should have been, and given the dire straits we were supposedly in, there seemed to be lots of food. And of course being me, now that there was a war on and rationing and all, I was in deprivation heaven and hardly needed my father screwing Davina in the next room to help me lose my appetite for a few years.

The rest of them ate eggs and goat's milk and greens from the garden, and there were baked beans that we'd stockpiled and Piper was getting incredibly good at making things with the dried beans and rice and bacon they put in our package most weeks. There were starting to be tomatoes from the garden, and there were lots of green beans and everyone except me missed bread which was getting harder to come by and especially Anchor butter which Edmond said he dreamed about though we made something I thought worked pretty well by beating the goat's milk for ages with a whisk.

One of the stranger things that we just came to accept was that no one seemed to know exactly where the food was coming from. At first they thought it must be the local council, but some people whispered that it was the Red Cross, or the Americans, and others suspected The Enemy, and lots of people wouldn't touch it at all Just In Case.

I was pretty happy to starve rather than eat food Davina made in peacetime but I never thought anyone was trying to poison us during the war. I tried eating a little more so Edmond would stop looking at me that way and after a week or so he even said I looked better by

which I'm sure he meant fatter so I cut back some after that.

But I was talking about the quarantine.

According to what Osbert picked up in one of his clandestine spy-boy meetings down at the pub, the Smallpox Epidemic was just a rumor spread around to keep us all quiet and scared and out of the way.

Then we heard that people were dying.

Edmond said that it was measles not smallpox and that most people weren't dying, but because it was almost impossible to get medicine, people were dying of pretty ordinary stuff like pneumonia and bad cases of chicken pox, and broken bones and some women died having babies.

We got flyers in with our food saying to boil all our water and *Be Extra Careful When Handling Knives, Tools or Firearms Because Minor Injuries Could Lead to Infection and Death*. Which struck me as extremely amusing given that we're supposedly in the middle of a war, which usually has the same effect.

I didn't know if the food was poisoned. I didn't know whether we'd get an infection and die. I didn't know if a bomb would fall on us. I didn't know whether Osbert would expose us to spores from some deadly disease picked up during his secret meetings. I didn't know if we would be taken prisoner, tortured, murdered, raped, forced to confess or inform on our friends.

The only thing I knew for certain was that all around me was more life than I'd ever experienced in all the years I'd been on earth and as long as no one shut me in the barn away from Edmond at night I was safe.

So there we are carrying on our happy little life of underage sex, child labor and espionage when someone came to visit us, which, after weeks of Just Us Five kind of took us by surprise, to put it mildly.

He was a not-too-bad-looking man around thirty-five who seemed too tired even to pretend to be all polite and friendly and he said I'm sorry to bother you but have you got any drugs?

We all stood there and gaped at him and speaking personally I was wondering whether he was setting up some kind of small business venture to sell cocaine to people who were housebound, deprived of television and generally bored senseless by the war.

We must have looked pretty moronic just staring at him with our mouths open because he said Perhaps I should speak to your mother or father and then Osbert puffed himself up like he was going to make a big speech and said There's only us. So I guess he decided against the speech after all.

Then the man looked puzzled and Osbert explained about Aunt Penn and even though the guy didn't say anything more, by the look on his face I was going to be surprised if that was the end of it as far as he was concerned even with all the other things he had to think about.

Then he picked up more or less where he left off and said I'm sorry, perhaps I should explain about the drugs, I'm Dr. Jameson and as you've probably noticed there's a war on and we're trying to take care of the people in this area.

We didn't say anything and so he just kept talking.

The surgeries have all been shut down. The hospitals are on skeleton staff and trying to deal with casualties coming in from the cities and have confiscated most of the drugs from the chemists so local people with basic problems like high blood pressure or diabetes are experiencing difficulties. We're trying to keep these problems from becoming life-threatening, but what we need is drugs. We're a little desperate, especially for antibiotics, and we're asking everyone to check around to see what they might have. Anything will help.

I looked over at Edmond who was listening in a way that other people listen when they can't quite hear, and I knew he was trying to hear something that wasn't being said. But Osbert said OK, we'll have a look upstairs and Edmond got up with the rest of them to rifle through drawers to see what they could find in the way of prescriptions so I guess whatever he heard was OK.

This leaves me and Dr. Jameson all alone and while he's looking me up and down I'm reminiscing about what a nice time I've had here in England completely free of doctors and what a crying shame it's come to an end so soon, and after a little silence he says, How long has this been going on? And I know he's not talking about the war and I hope he's not talking about Edmond and me, so I say What? like I don't have a clue what he's talking about.

But instead of starting up a big lecture and calling me Young Lady and all the usual crap he just looks at me in a sad sort of way with his tired eyes and says very softly Aren't there enough troubles in the world without this too?

And for once I don't know what to say.

Eventually Edmond and Isaac and Osbert and Piper come back with a whole bunch of half-empty boxes because Aunt Penn isn't much for throwing things away and the doctor looks at them and smiles his tired smile and says Thanks, and then he looks at us all standing there

waiting for him to go and pauses for a minute and finally he says Is there anything you need that you don't have?

And we all know what he's talking about and I want to shout NO we especially DO NOT NEED ANY GOVERNMENT SURPLUS PARENTS THANK YOU VERY MUCH but I don't say anything and neither does anyone else so he sighs his tired sigh and goes.

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Something in the air shifted after the visit from the doctor.

Not exactly because of anything you could put your finger on but if I had to guess I'd say that the magic we were trusting to keep us safe from the outside world suddenly seemed too fragile to protect us forever.

Everyone was quieter than usual that night. Piper and I wedged ourselves into one of the big chairs and were reading Flashman together and it was late but still light enough outside to read with the help of a candle or two and all the windows and doors were open to let the warm air in along with the smell of honeysuckle, and the dogs were dozing near us and Piper suddenly stopped reading and looked at me in her solemn way and said Are you in love with Edmond?

And I thought for a minute about the best way to answer and then I just said Yes.

She stared at me with the Family Stare, the one that normal people don't ever do because it might be considered impolite to crash around in another person's innermost thoughts without their permission, and then she said Well I'm glad you love him because I do too.

My eyes filled with tears then, I couldn't help it. I put my arms around her and we just sat like that with my tears running down into her hair and the night coming down darker and darker and the soft feel of it all around us.

She asked if she could sleep in my bed that night and I said yes and we went upstairs and lay close together in the narrow bed and I wondered if maybe she missed her mother, and then around halfway through the night Edmond came in saying he was lonely and he lay down too only facing in the other direction since it was the only way he could fit, and then around sunrise Isaac wandered in too wondering where everyone had gone and when he saw us he just smiled a little and went down to the kitchen and brought up the big brown teapot and some mugs on a tray and we all piled together on the bed on top of each other like puppies and drank our tea while the sun streamed in thick and yellow through the window.

And it was Edmond, with his oddball sense of what hasn't happened yet, who knew we had to mark that day out as special and he said It's going to be hot, let's go down to the river for a swim.

So we collected our towels and blankets and Piper packed some food in a basket and we put on shoes and changed out of the clothes we'd been living in every day for weeks and into nice clean ones, and Isaac called the dogs and Piper got Ding from the barn, and then with a feeling of getting a day off from school which may have been totally weird but was how we felt, we set off.

If you climbed up the footpath and walked and walked, up past the lambing barn, along the edges of about six more fields eventually, after an hour, with the little Ding Ding Ding of the bell around Ding's neck for company, you came to a river. Edmond said it wasn't as good for

fishing as the part we drove to that first day but was better for swimming because it was deeper. And it ran along the edge of the most beautiful meadow you've ever seen, so full of poppies and buttercups and daisies and wild roses and hundreds of other flowers I didn't recognize that if you squinted at it from low down it looked like a blizzard of color.

Next to the river was an ancient apple tree just starting to lose its blossom and Piper and I laid out blankets half under it and half in the sun and then we sat down in the shade to try to cool off while the boys threw off their clothes and leaped shouting into the freezing water and then tried to splash us and called us to Come In Or Else! and finally we got tired of them teasing so we just thought Why not? and Piper took off all her clothes and I took my jeans off and we tiptoed in holding hands, screaming a little and jumping up and down because it was so cold.

Like everyone always says, It's beautiful once you're in.

The feeling of the cold water and the hot sun and having the river just flow over your skin like a dolphin wasn't something I had enough words to describe but was the kind of feeling you never forget.

I got cold quicker than any of the others, who were having races and sitting on rocks by the edge like turtles to soak up the sun before jumping in again, so I got out and flopped down on a blanket in the warm sun and waited patiently while the heat stopped the shivering in my skin and gradually warmed my blood all the way through and then I just closed my eyes and watched the petals fall and listened to the heavy low buzz of fat pollen-drunk bees and tried to imagine melting into the earth so I could spend eternity under this tree.

Then Edmond and Piper came out of the water, Edmond put his jeans on and they both took turns making cold handprints on my stomach which I pretended not to notice, while Osbert and Isaac floated around in the river with the dogs, Isaac humming a melody and Osbert humming the harmony not quite in tune and it was nice for a while to have Osbert be part of our gang instead of the one who always had more important things to do.

Edmond lay down a few inches away from me on the blanket and lit a cigarette and closed his eyes and after a minute or two I could feel the heat from his body flowing into mine, and when Piper came over with both hands full of petals and threw them up in the air so they drifted down over us both, Edmond laughed and asked What was that for? And Piper smiled her solemn smile and said For Love.

Eventually everyone came out of the water and for hours and hours and hours we lay under the tree and talked and read and occasionally someone got up to throw a stick for the dogs and Piper played with Ding and made tiny woven wreaths of poppies and daisies to decorate his baby horns and Isaac whistled back and forth to a robin and Edmond just lay there smoking and telling me he loved me without saying anything out loud and if there ever was a more perfect day in the history of time it isn't one I've heard about.

The sun waited to go down longer than usual that day so we kept putting off the moment we had to leave and the boys and dogs swam in the river again and eventually we all headed back practically in the dark, dog-tired and too happy to talk much.

I guess there was a war going on somewhere in the world that night but it wasn't one that could touch us.

A few days later we had another visitor only this time he wore a British Army uniform and brought a lackey with him to take notes and check things off on a list. He didn't seem particularly interested in us living without adults, though I noticed him giving Edmond's burning cigarette a look and I thought Boy oh boy if you're going to spend any time nosing around here you'd better be a little more particular about what shocks you and what doesn't, and then Edmond gave me a look like Watch What You Say only it should be Watch What You Think when he's around.

The guy poked around and asked a lot of questions like how many rooms we had and did the roof leak and how many outbuildings were there and who if anyone had been here to see us and I noticed Edmond answered the question of the outbuildings without mentioning the lambing barn. Then Mr. Regular Army and his Man Friday tramped off to look at the lay of the land and came back a while later and said It will be perfect and boy did I ever NOT like the sound of that.

It turned out that we were being Sequestered which had to be explained to me since I'm not exactly in the habit of having people take over a perfectly private house to send the inhabitants off to live god knows where for The Duration, and all I could think was this would not happen in America but of course for all I knew the Green Berets were already holed up in Bloomingdale's.

Osbert was so anxious to look helpful he was practically standing at attention but for once I felt sorry for him because it seemed pretty obvious that we were all going to have to do what they said no matter what, and maybe Osbert was only hoping that somehow he could protect us all by being Respectful. I stuck with what I was good at, i.e. Blank bordering on Sullen and when I looked over at Edmond he had the saddest expression on his face but when he saw I was looking he smiled.

Osbert was the only one with the courage to say what we were all thinking, which was What about us? And the army guy looked up in an absent kind of way that told us everything we needed to know about how concerned they were for our happiness and we kind of drifted off together like a huddled mass yearning to breathe free, no one wanting to lose track of any of the others.

Of course at this point it hadn't occurred to me that we might be separated, but do you know anyone, even in the middle of a war, who's going to take on a group of five kids especially ones like us who don't exactly remind you of Little Women even on our best day?

The army guy went away and said he'd be back tomorrow and afterwards we all stood there shell-shocked if you'll excuse the expression and silent, just in case anything we said out loud turned out to be true.

I started out in bed with Piper that night and as I lay awake with my arms around her waiting for her to fall asleep I wondered if Dr. Jameson had anything to do with this, after all it seemed pretty coincidental to have two visitors in less than a week when no one had noticed us for ages. After an hour or so when I was sure Piper was calm and safe I slipped off to be with Edmond and we said even less than usual only climbed inside each other for comfort and oblivion and fell asleep that way wrapped in black sheep blankets and together dreamt a single dream that there was no one left in the world but us.