

Piper and I lived with the McEvoy's like people living someone else's life.

Because we were part of an army family we got a much clearer idea of what was happening in England, though a fair amount of it we could have done without knowing due to its not-entirely-cheerful nature.

We spent a couple of days gathering information from Jane McEvoy who liked to talk and was pretty lonely especially since her son was away at school in the North and hadn't been heard of since the first bombs went off and she was desperately worried that something bad had happened to him which seemed fairly likely to me.

I went down to get some water late at night and heard her in the kitchen with Major Mac and he was saying he was certain the boy was safe and We'll all be together again just as soon as this bloody mess is sorted. He sounded amazingly calm and reassuring but I could hear an occasional hoarse gasping kind of cry like an animal choking to death in a noose and when I looked through the door I could see Mrs. M shaking all over and him with his arms around her looking exhausted and patting her over and over saying Now now, love, and I decided to live without a glass of water that night.

The next day her eyes were red but otherwise she seemed OK, and to make conversation she started telling us how proud she was of her husband and that one of Major McEvoy's big jobs was organizing a field hospital for local people because all the real hospitals had been taken over to fix up people who'd been bombed, poisoned or gassed in London. They got shipped out here when the city hospitals ran out of room.

She said that since most of the people out in the country were only dying of appendicitis, childbirth and ordinary Preexisting Conditions the field hospital was supposed to take care of them while the more Colorful Cases of War Injury got hospitals with proper walls and beds.

At the beginning, she said, I went to the hospital every day. I read to the patients and played with those poor injured children and tried to make myself useful. But now they'll only let military personnel inside due to the security risk. She looked kind of outraged at this and said As if I'm some kind of danger to those people! and Piper and I exchanged a quick glance and we were both thinking the same thing namely, Only if being unhinged is contagious.

Later Major M told us you'd be amazed at the number of things that can go wrong for civilians in a war. For instance, he said, let's say a kid gets appendicitis or breaks his leg, there was no telephone to tell someone that the bone was sticking out of his thigh, no petrol to drive a car to the field hospital, if you happened to know where it was in the first place, and a big shortage of antibiotics if you did manage to get the kid to a surgeon somehow and wanted to make sure he or she didn't die of infection a week or so later.

He also told us about people with cancer who needed expensive drugs and a pregnant woman he knew with RH-negative blood whose baby would probably die pretty much no matter what, and old people, some of whom would die sooner or later of strokes and heart attacks or lack of drugs, and some who already had.

Another time Major McEvoy started telling us about the farm problems in the area that he was trying to control and they mostly involved cows who couldn't be milked by electric milking machines once the emergency generators stopped working and had to be milked by hand or they could get mastitis and die. Now there's a side effect of war I bet you never

considered.

Once you start thinking about all that stuff that wasn't working it's kind of hard to know where it all ends. Like the incubators for baby chicks not to mention baby humans and electric fences and hospital monitors and those things you use to shock people back to life when their hearts stop and computer systems and trains and airplanes. Even the gas supplies for heat and cooking are regulated by electricity, said Major McEvoy, and how do you think you pump water out of a well?

I felt a science report coming on titled Electricity, Our Helpful Friend.

Then there was the problem of burying all the cows and baby chicks and people who died and apparently there were lots of dead things and they were well on their way to becoming a big stinking rotten health problem, but that might have been too much information for me just then, and I thought I wasn't going to eat another hamburger or chicken leg again in a hurry.

The Good Major was also trying to distribute things like milk and eggs and other farm food so all the occupied people wouldn't die of starvation and one or two other tiny details like that so you could say he had his hands full and then some.

I guess by a combination of politeness and osmosis I learned more about farming in the few weeks we lived with the McEvoy's than I was ever likely to find out in a lifetime on the tenth floor of an Eighty-sixth Street apartment building where the closest you ever got to Agricultural Produce was a corned beef sandwich from Zabar's with a half-sour pickle which I knew perfectly well used to be a cucumber but how it got to be a Pickle on a Plate was anyone's guess.

Anyway, all this stuff was happening under the rules of The Occupation which never struck me as being entirely clear but as far as I could tell meant you could go ahead and do whatever you liked as long as no one told you not to. I didn't really understand The Occupation because it didn't seem like the kind of War we all knew and loved from your average made-for-TV miniseries.

When I heard how it happened I was pretty impressed by the cleverness of the guys who planned it, who as far as I understood, basically waited for most of the British Army to be lured into crises on the other side of the world and then waltzed in and cut off all the transportation and communications and stuff so basically they were DEFENDING Britain against its own returning armed forces rather than attacking it.

Major McEvoy said Think about it as a Hostage Situation with Sixty Million Hostages so I did.

I've probably missed some important parts of the explanation but that seemed to be the gist of it and whenever anyone went into more detail I found my brain wandering to things like I wonder if he dyes his hair and Whatever possessed them to choose that color wallpaper?

There were obviously a few military types still left in England, mostly part of the Territorial Army, which sounds pretty impressive until you realize they're a bunch of moonlighting guys who spend a few weekends a year doing basic training and wishing they were one of the Dirty Dozen. Major McEvoy said it was more or less a Known Fact that the whole situation was temporary and by the time the British Forces could get organized again it would all be over and the Occupiers would be History i.e. dead, but I guess the invaders were trying to Make a Point and had never really expected it to turn out happily ever after for them.

What impressed me was how simple it seemed to be to throw a whole country into chaos by dumping a bunch of poison into some of the water supplies and making sure no one

could get electricity or phone connections and setting off a few big bombs here and there in tunnels and government buildings and airports.

We also found out that The Enemy was one reason there was no gas for anyone, since Major McEvoy told Piper and me that Petrol was one of the first things they took over when all the trouble started. The other reason was that you needed Guess What to pump it out of the ground and into the tank of your car.

Eleven letters, starts with E.

I guess it shows the importance of having your own army, even a small leftover piece of an army, because although the Bad Guys snatched up everything they could get their hands on, at least the Good Guys seemed genuinely dedicated to distributing what was left around the place so as few people as possible died from neglect or outright stupidity.

All in all I felt a little guilty about the fact that while us kids had been living the Life of Riley, a whole bunch of other people had been scurrying around like lunatics trying to keep the Social Fabric from Unraveling and my personal belief was there were too many problems to think about and not enough people to sort them out.

In other words, they were desperately short of people to get things done and that gave us a chance to GET OUT and eventually get back to where we belonged. This was obviously our goal, but in the meantime we figured that actually doing something might stop us from dying of boredom, which I was starting to realize was a major killer in a modern war.

So for all our making fun of Osbert and his passion to join the War Effort I could see now that this was our ticket to getting back home.

Or at least that was the plan.

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During all this time I was in touch with Edmond. Strange as it sounds, he visited me, not exactly like god visiting Moses or angels telling Mary she's knocked up with the Christ Child, but come to think of it not completely unlike that either.

I had to be in a certain state of mind—quiet, distracted, sometimes half asleep—and then I might feel a kind of aura, a lightening of the space behind my eyes and I'd know he was there. I could smell his smell of tobacco and earth and something radiant and spicy like amber; could feel the smooth glide of his skin, though I never exactly saw him. Once he had a cough, and his breathing sounded slow and heavy. Another time on a cold night when he kissed me I could feel his body shivering against mine. Sometimes I could just feel his eyes on me, holding me with his quizzical wise-dog gaze, and I would push off with one foot and try to coast for hours on that feeling.

Once, in a trance that wasn't quite a dream, an image appeared in my head and I knew it was the place he and Isaac were living, and I could see the people living with them, and how they passed the time. Another time I heard the frail scratching cry of a newborn baby and Edmond seemed tired and cheerless and disappeared before I could find out what had happened.

Whether I could feel his presence or not, I talked to him constantly, telling him about Piper and Jet and the McEvoy's and our life the way it was now, and then in the middle of some rambling monologue I might get the feeling that he was there listening, as if I'd conjured him from

thin air, pulled him out of a hat by the ears like a magician's rabbit. I was happiest when he just came and lay down next to me, and I could almost feel the weight of his body against mine. His presence silenced, if only for a few seconds, the crackling anxiety that made my blood grate against my bones and for a little while I'd feel melted and soft.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not about to write a scientific paper about this. I believe in the spirit world about as not at all as the next person. I'm just saying what happened.

In retrospect I have to think it was the kind of connection that makes people decide to phone each other at the same instant after fifty years of not talking. You hear about siblings adopted at birth into families thousands of miles apart who both name their first child Vera, dogs that begin to howl the instant their owner is killed in a war, people who dream plane crashes. It's the sort of communication there's no particular reason to believe in under ordinary circumstances and I'm generally not big on ghosts. Ouija boards and black cats are way down the list of neuroses I suffer from.

So you'll understand why I didn't make a big song and dance about my meetings with Edmond. I wasn't even sure I wanted to talk about it with Piper.

I was trying to revamp my reputation. This time around I thought I'd be the sane one.

Before we started angling to get into the wide world again the first question I wanted answered was this whole smallpox epidemic thing.

Major McEvoy looked kind of uncomfortable when I asked him and said It was Not a Likely Danger to the Population at Large at the Present Time, and when I put on my best shocked face he said Now Daisy, how would Things Be if there was nothing to stop people wandering around Spreading Rumors and Getting Hysterical and trying to organize raids on The Enemy and that sort of thing, hmmm?

And then he gave me his Name, Rank and Serial Number look and changed the subject.

Not being entirely witless I got the picture that if we were going to die it wasn't going to be from smallpox.

What was interesting about this little insight was that I could see the army had a point, but it still seemed like a sneaky trick to perpetrate on all those simple country folk.

With that worry sorted out I started trying to figure out a way for Piper and me not to spend the rest of our lives rotting in Reston Bridge when we could be out in the world possibly running into some of our long-lost relatives.

So after a few days sitting around twiddling our thumbs and going pretty much stark raving stir-crazy trying to have a sensible conversation while Alby whacked us on the head with a plastic sword every six seconds, we asked Major McEvoy to find us something to do because we were Hard Workers and wanted to Help People which was not a total lie except the people we wanted to help were us. He looked kind of pensive for a minute and said he would think about it and get back to us.

You can imagine that the good Major had a lot of thinking to do given that even in the best possible light we were still a fairly useless pair, but then I remembered JET, and that was a STROKE OF GENIUS because a well-trained sheepdog and someone who knew how to get him to do things were just about priceless at the moment what with most of the local farmers dependent on herding their animals with big off-road bikes and there no longer being any fuel.

Piper knew dog training from Isaac and the two of them were the world's foremost natural Animal Whisperers and could make dogs and goats and sheep and probably bugs too do pretty much whatever they asked just by looking at them in a certain way and whistling a little low whistle which for Isaac especially was extremely useful, given the limits of his conversational aptitude.

Major McEvoy kind of perked up at this brainstorm and asked for a sheepdog demonstration. So with a couple of whistles, Piper sent Jet out into the garden and what do you know he was off like a shot, crouching down low when he got to Alby and then very gently without being obvious moving him little by little toward us until poor old Alby was standing right in front of his dad looking confused and wondering why every time he turned around to run back out to play Jet was blocking his path.

Piper gave him a pat and looked as smug as she was ever likely to look and I thought YES we are on our way, now if only I can figure out some possible use for me before they stick me in some out-box marked Cannon Fodder.

But it turned out that Major McEvoy was pretty nice after all and also he probably knew that walking off with someone else's pretty nine-year-old girl even in the middle of a war

wasn't totally kosher and so he asked me to come along too and I gave Piper a mental thumbs-up sign and she smiled.

It turned out that our place wasn't the only one that had been sequestered and Major M started taking us every morning to Meadow Brook Farm which was the largest dairy farm for fifty miles in any direction and should have been renamed Fort Dix Acres since the Meadows and the Brooks were teeming with soldiers all trying to take the place of machines.

The problem was, the cows had to go out every day to graze because there wasn't enough hay to feed them and they had to be brought in to be milked twice a day which sounds simple enough until you think about three hundred cows all coming and going, and a lot of army guys milling around the farm like bulls in china shops.

Jet was a miracle to watch in action and he had most of the remains of the occupied British Army in love with him after the first day and Piper was right behind him in their affections. She could get him to separate out ten cows and bring them in to be milked by the army guys and in the meantime have the next ten ready while he took the first ten back.

All the big hunky army types couldn't get over sweet serious little Piper whistling her magic whistle and this black and white blur of a dog running exactly where she told him to and she must have reminded every single one of them of their little sister back home or the one they wished they had back home or possibly just the Virgin Mary. Whenever they weren't doing something else they kind of lurked around with moony expressions watching Piper and Jet in action and you could tell most of them felt happy just being near her and that Old Family Magic.

Piper acted like she didn't even notice all the attention but I could tell she liked the way everyone asked her serious questions about Jet and treated her like something special. In the average morning at least three or four big guys would hang around for ages and finally get up the courage to say He reminds me exactly of my dog Dipper back home, or How does he know which whistle means what?

But I got the feeling that what they all wanted to say was just You have the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen in my life.

I guess this was fairly obvious, given that she had the same effect on most people, but with all those quirky brothers getting in the way she probably didn't get as much chance to be noticed as you might expect.

The fly in the ointment was that there was too much work for Jet and not enough for me. Having Gin around to help Jet would have solved the first problem and been an all-around godsend but that still left the second. I spent some of my endless hours of leisure learning to shoot a gun, which I thought might come in handy someday, if not in the war then back on the streets of New York. It was a lot harder than it looked but after a while I got pretty good thanks to all the expert marksmen hanging around disguised as milkmaids.

I tried raising the subject with Major McEvoy of getting Gin drafted into our section of the British Army and you could tell for a minute he forgot that he was supposed to keep us out of trouble and away from thoughts of Regrouping because he just looked sort of absentminded and said No, it wouldn't be possible to get Gin right now because of the Situation on the Roads and also she's probably as useful to Gateshead Farm as Jet is to us.

Thank god I have years of Emergency Deadpan Practice because you wouldn't have guessed that Gateshead Farm meant anything more to me than Porridge Oats but like any good undercover agent I now had two names to put together to make an address and Major McEvoy thought we were still talking about dogs.

I didn't tell Piper just yet because I was hoping for divine intervention about how we were going to get to Gateshead Farm, near Kingly, East of Here, and when.

Back to the dogs, in the end they compromised and managed to find a silly border collie named Ben who wasn't much more than a teenage puppy to work alongside the Master only it didn't work out as well as you might have hoped since he wasn't the brainiest dog on earth and besides was afraid of cows.

It got so that Jet knew his job so well that either one of the army guys or I could take over some of the time while Piper tried to train some sense into dim Ben, practicing over and over again until he was just this side of useless. He still ran away bleating if any of the cows took it into their heads to look at him sideways, but most of the time they couldn't be bothered and he managed to muddle through.

Sometimes I caught Jet giving him a look that was totally unimpressed and I could almost see Jet thinking Excuse me, but who invited this blockhead to the party?

And sometimes I wondered if he might be thinking the same thing about me.

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Now you might have gleaned from some of the hints dropped so far that food was not my best subject. So it was kind of ironic that the part of the army I got enlisted into was the one trying to provide it for everyone.

There was the whole milk operation, starring Piper and Jet the Wonder Dog, and the part that came after milking was complicated by having to heat and sterilize the milk since there were no fridges to keep it cold and that turned out to be so hard that eventually they gave up and just served it the old-fashioned way straight from the cow. Everyone worried about uncontaminated containers but the best solution turned out to be making people Bring a Bottle, then at least the army knew the milk was OK when it left them and if it poisoned anyone later it wasn't their fault.

There were a couple of local guys who knew all about butchering so they were the lucky ones who got to kill and divvy up the cows which was a lot bloodier than you might want to find yourself thinking about on a dark and stormy night. They were popular though, and suddenly had whole bunches of friends they'd never noticed before queuing around the block clutching barbecue tongs.

Chickens were having their necks wrung all over the place especially if they didn't keep churning out eggs, and it was pretty surprising to me how many of the older folks seemed to be right at home strangling a chicken. Piper said it was because of the Last War and rationing and everyone keeping chickens and I was pleased to hear that some of the skills I was picking up would stand me in good stead in Later Life, assuming I had one.

And finally, anyone who was healthy enough and willing enough to pick crops was hauled in to help and that was where I came in.

My first job was picking apples, which was somewhat more useful than hanging around on the outskirts of the Piper Appreciation Society. I got a lot of doubtful looks at first about whether I was strong enough to work so hard but these days determination was nine-tenths of the law and also as time went on there were a lot more thin people around and I didn't stand out so much.

I worked with eight other army people including three soldiers and their wives and two other civilians. We started early in the morning and worked until it started to get dark and after only a few hours we drifted into cliques like we were all back in school.

My partner was a local woman called Elena who was from Liverpool originally so I didn't understand most of what she said for the first few days and vice versa. Eventually we started chatting about this and that and soon the stories started coming out and I heard all about how she and her husband Daniel met and what were their favorite movies and how often they had sex and though she was a lot older than me and we barely spoke the same language she turned out to be the kind of person you could talk to about pretty much anything without worrying that she'd report you to the Pope.

She wanted to know all about my American and English families even though she'd never met any of them except Piper, and how I'd ended up picking apples in the middle of a foreign country not to mention the middle of a foreign war. Sometimes I thought I might implode if I didn't talk to another human being about the events of my new life, especially the parts someone my age wouldn't be allowed to see in the movies. But every time I was just on the verge of pouring it all out to Elena I changed my mind at the last minute just in case.

Luckily it seemed riveting enough to her that I was American and had been sent over by my Evil Stepmother which got her all clucking and tutting and all I had to do was look kind of tragic and say nothing at all for a few minutes and suddenly I had a new best friend enlisting the whole bunch of apple pickers into hating Davina on faith, which cheered me up for ages.

When we started work they gave us big boxes to pack the fruit in and the basic trick was not to throw the apples in or they would bruise and rot and ruin the rest of them in the box which suddenly made sense of the One Bad Apple expression my teachers used to trot out all the time, or Two if you counted Leah.

We had baskets, and ladders you had to move whenever you ran out of apples close enough to reach, and when the baskets were either full or unbearably heavy you passed them down to one of the others and they unpacked the fruit carefully and passed back empty baskets. It didn't seem to matter whether I was picking or packing because both jobs were equally tiring, and the first few days I had to lie on the ground for twenty minutes at a time to keep from passing out from exhaustion and the pain in my arms. Elena was nice about it and just kept working around me.

It was such hard work that at first I thought I wouldn't be able to stand it, what with every muscle in my body aching and me hardly able to climb into the truck or get out of bed the next day. But I did it because pushing myself farther and farther past what was possible made me feel calm, which is hard to explain but something I was good at.

One of the guys who worked with us was a few years older than me and I didn't like him much but unfortunately the feeling wasn't mutual. He was called Joe and he started hanging around trying to get my attention by telling stupid jokes while we worked and asking totally duh questions like What's it like being a Yank? Elena felt sorry for Joe due to him not being the sharpest knife in the rack, especially when it came to picking up rejection vibes, but it was easier to feel sorry for him if you weren't being eyed up like prey.

Maybe he's lonely, she said, and I just looked at her wondering if she expected me to open a Home for the Socially Challenged or what. Then she started giggling and I had the feeling we were thinking the same thing, namely, some people are lonely for all the right reasons.

After that we both pretty much ignored him.

Most of the workers except Piper, Jet, a few others and me lived at Meadow Brook so we were picked up every morning at seven and taken home at seven every evening and every night we fell asleep in the truck and just about managed to wake up for some food and climb into bed and that was our day.

It took a lot of getting used to but after the first week we compared muscles and I told Piper all about Elena and it almost made up for the fact that when we had a day off neither of us got out of bed at all. Even Jet didn't seem interested in moving out from under the bed except when we called him for food.

The plums turned ripe at about the same time as the apples and sometimes we moved from one to the other just to vary the routine but it was simpler to strip a tree of apples because they were easier to handle and you didn't have to move the ladder so often and when the plums fell off the trees they rotted and attracted thousands of wasps so Elena and I stuck with apples when we could.

Elena was what you might call a Big Girl and you could tell she wanted to ask me about being so thin but being English she would rather have sawed her own legs off at the knees. I caught her looking pretty puzzled a few times when she saw me nibbling at bits of lunch when everyone else was wolfing down anything in sight and I could tell, war or no war, she was thinking *If Only I Had Her Self-Control*.

I found out she'd been trying to have a baby for seven years and was smack in the middle of some special last-ditch treatment when the war broke out and she couldn't get any more treatment now and was forty-three and didn't know when she'd ever get another chance.

I told her she should borrow Alby for a few days if she wanted to appreciate how great it was to be childless but when I looked at her she was just managing to smile and her eyes were kind of bleak and I wished I hadn't said anything at all.

After about ten days of picking some of us moved over to broad beans and that was worse because you were always bent over with a whole new set of aching muscles but at least the beans tasted nice when you got them home and cooked them. It was getting to a point where there wasn't much around that tasted like anything you'd want to eat and even I had to say I could do with a nice piece of toast which made Elena laugh.

One night we were driving home through the usual checkpoints and Piper and I were asleep and Joe, who sometimes came with us to stay with his parents in the village, suddenly took it into his head to stand up and get show-offy, and I guess thinking war was some kind of open discussion forum where everyone was really interested in your opinion, started shouting a whole bunch of obscenities at one of the checkpoint guards and when Major McEvoy told him to sit down in a really icy army tone of voice he ignored him and kept shouting stuff about Johnny Foreigner being an Effing Bastard and worse.

And then in an almost lazy kind of way the checkpoint guy who'd been looking at him raised his gun and pulled the trigger and there was a loud crack and part of Joe's face exploded and there was blood everywhere and he fell over out of the truck into the road.

Piper watched the whole thing without moving a muscle but the shock of it made me retch and I had to turn away over the side of the truck. Someone else was screaming and when I turned back the whole world seemed to have slowed down and grown quiet and from inside the silence I watched the guard go right back to chatting with his friend and saw Major McEvoy's head roll back for a moment and his eyes close and a look of despair crumple up his face and in that split second I wondered whether he was really that attached to the kid and then

it was with horror that I looked down and saw that Joe was still alive, gurgling and trying to move the arm that wasn't caught under his body and when I looked back at Major M I realized he was doing what he felt was his duty as a member of the armed forces defending a British national and still in slow motion he was climbing out of the truck and his plan must have been to get Joe on his feet somehow and then to safety when I heard about a hundred shots from a machine gun and the momentum of the blasts hurled Major M backward across the road away from Joe with blood welling up in holes all over him and this time you could see Joe's condition was 100% dead with brains splattered everywhere and our driver didn't wait around to see what might happen next but just stepped on the gas and as we drove away I thought I felt tears on my face but when I put my hand up to wipe them it turned out to be blood and nobody made a single sound but just sat there shell-shocked and all I could think about was poor Major M lying there in the dust though I guess he was much too dead to notice.

There never were seven more silent human beings in the back of a truck, we were too stunned even to cry or speak. When we reached Reston Bridge our driver, who I knew was a close friend of the Major's, got out of the truck and stood there for a minute trying to get up the courage to go inside and tell Mrs. M what happened, but first he turned to us and said in a voice that sounded broken and full of rage, In case anyone needed reminding This is a War.

And the way he said those words made me feel like I was falling.