

Following the river changed our lives instantly for the better. We knew roughly where we were headed and I didn't have to spend hours juggling the compass and the map and living in a panicky limbo wondering if somehow we'd gotten turned around and were heading to Scotland or Spain by mistake.

Also knowing how far we had left to go helped with figuring out how much food we could eat and though we were no better off than before, at least we didn't have to worry about making half a jar of strawberry jam and a couple of inches of sausage last another month.

Piper kept finding field mushrooms and saying they were perfectly safe to eat and up until now I thought it was a bad idea in case she was wrong and we got poisoned but she seemed so sure and there were so many and I was starting to think if we didn't have something different to eat we might die of despair even before we died of hunger so we decided to cook our first meal of mushrooms and salami and here's how we did it.

First we set up our so-called tent and waited until sundown so no one would see the smoke, then we collected some dried dead weeds and made a pile of them and next to it a pile of twigs and little bits of branches that were completely dead and dry, then we got some stones from the riverbank and made a circle and saved a few stones that we could balance our little metal bowl on, then we lit the dry weeds with one of our matches and waited till they caught and then added twigs slowly, and although it took two tries and four matches and the twigs weren't as dry as they should have been, we had a pretty nice fire going after about twenty minutes.

It must be some well-known phenomenon that if you stare into a fire when you're already half out of your mind due to a variety of deprivations you will immediately find yourself hypnotized. It took a supreme effort of will to pull my eyes away from it and if I hadn't done that Piper and I might still be sitting there today, gazing into the flames and feeling the heat on our faces and hands, triumphant about making something as wild and effective as a fire, even though we did start out with matches which was obviously a lot easier than rubbing sticks together.

I left Piper staring into the flames and cut a small piece off our chunk of salami, then chopped it up into even tinier pieces and put them in the metal bowl and because the salami had so much fat in it, it started to melt immediately and then I took about six big cut-up mushrooms and a few of the little blue ones Piper said were called blewits and added them slowly to the bowl with the fat and the little pieces of meat.

I made a cover for the bowl out of a piece of bark that started to smoke at the edges and burn, which made it hard to take off so I could stir the mushrooms, and I burned eight out of ten of my fingers getting the bowl off the fire so the mushrooms wouldn't burn and it took almost an hour of doing this but eventually the pieces of mushroom looked small and brown and then we waited for them to cool and you wouldn't believe how something you found in a field could taste so good especially with the little pieces of salami which were salty and a little burned and crunchy.

And as I started to eat the pieces of mushroom I suddenly thought All this time I've been starving, and without noticing I said it out loud, so that Piper said So have I, without even looking up and I thought No you haven't, not in the same way and I hope you never are.

We finished the mushrooms and then washed the bowl in the river and mixed a couple handfuls of blackberries with some strawberry jam for dessert and then washed the bowl again and made hot water over the fire which we sipped and pretended was tea and for an hour or so

we felt full of good warm things and happy.

Then we put out the fire and went to bed.

About two or three hours after we fell asleep I woke up to find Piper sitting up next to me wide awake with a look of naked terror on her face. I sat up too but couldn't see or hear anything and I just said What? What's happening? but by that time Piper had started yelling and I practically had to smother her to shut her up because I was so scared of someone hearing us.

She was thrashing around like a person having a fit and trying to claw my face with her hands and I thought maybe she was suffering from some form of mushroom poisoning. NO! she screamed and I thought she meant me but her eyes weren't focused outward at all even though I was trying to put my hand over her mouth and she was shouting STOP STOP!!! and I was concentrating on her so hard that the noise in my head when I finally heard it too took me completely by surprise. It started softly like a throbbing noise far away and for a second I looked around like mad, thinking it must be near us, but all around was quiet and empty except for nature and the night.

Gradually over the throbbing I could make out something like a tape played too fast so the voices were all squeaky and odd like cartoon alien voices and then I started to pick out individual noises and then I could hear people crying and screaming and by then the voices were so loud and so desperate and it was so horrible that I could only hug my head and beg them to STOP STOP STOP.

Piper wasn't screaming anymore and just lay curled up on the ground with her eyes squeezed shut and her hands clamped over her ears and she looked so terrified that I forced myself to go over to her and try to help but she kicked and hit me when I came near so I backed off and she just rocked herself back and forth like a crazy orphanage baby trying to comfort itself.

All this time the noises were screaming louder and louder in my head and I had to get away from it but nothing worked and all I could do was make a kind of droning noise in my throat to drown it out and after a while it started to fade and got fainter and fainter and eventually the throbbing noise went too and it was silent all around us again and I threw up.

Piper finally opened her eyes and crouched up on her knees and she looked at me panicky and wild like a cornered animal and said We have to help them!

And I felt angry and said Help who? thinking we're the ones who need help if we were going to die in the woods from mushroom poisoning. But Piper didn't answer and just kept saying We have to help them We have to help them, over and over like a desperate tape on a loop.

There was no moon at all that night and no point trying to walk because the darkness was so black we couldn't even see the path and though Piper was frantic to get going, even she realized it was useless until we had some light.

We tried to go back to sleep but it didn't work and so we waited trembling in the cold night air until it started to get light enough to walk and then we walked and walked and didn't stop until nightfall when we collapsed and didn't even have the energy to put up our tent but just put the blankets down on the ground and I kept thinking I could feel bugs crawling on me and stones under my bones and Piper half went to sleep but kept waking up with a jolt and finally just when the sky was starting to get light we both fell asleep, like vampires.

A few hours later we woke up sweaty and anxious and once more walked as fast as we could, given how exhausted and starving we were, in a kind of hollow desperate silence.

Neither of us mentioned the mushroom night again.

It was two days since we'd come to the bend in the river and I figured if we didn't get lost, another day of walking should get us to Kingly.

I tried not to think about what we would find when we got there.

There was no point letting my brain get there first. It might decide to turn back.

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Our footpath finally came to an end on a winding paved road just wide enough for a single car. The road was sunk deep down with high banks on either side and hedges on top of the banks so it was like standing in a ten-foot trench with a low gray lid, which was the sky.

Birds were zooming in and out of the hedges singing and squawking and probably wondering what we were doing here since the wild world had been mostly theirs for months now. Neither of us liked being on a road all exposed so anyone could drive up behind us at any time because there was no place to hide without scrambling up a ten-foot slope. But along with being nervous there was a secret feeling of exhilaration to think we might almost be Somewhere.

From the map it looked like we were less than a mile from Kingly, but unless we found a nice policeman or a friendly milkmaid to give us directions to Gateshead Farm, we didn't have a clue what road it was on or where to find it.

We walked about a quarter of a mile past a handful of empty boarded-up houses, and came to a signpost that pointed toward Kingly and Hopton and Ustlewith so we just kept walking hoping for the best when what do you know, the next turning had a faded wooden sign on it saying it was called Gateshead Lane and by now Piper and I were almost running.

Neither of us wanted to speculate about what we'd find when we got to the farm but no matter how I tried to calm down I couldn't stop the hope and excitement in my chest making my heart crash against my ribs and Piper seemed unnaturally flushed.

After about half a mile we thought maybe it wasn't the right road after all, but we kept going because there was nothing else to do and finally there was a sign and a gate and a couple of farm machines like threshers marooned in mid-thresh and the nervous excited feeling began shifting into something anxious and dark as we walked through the gate because I did not for one second like the atmosphere of the place.

You couldn't really see the farm from the road but we saw a lot of birds flying around to the left so we walked forward carefully and finally came around a bend and saw the main barn and still no signs of life and now all I wanted to do was run away as fast as I could because you didn't need to be a child genius to get the feeling that all those birds were circling around for a reason.

I'd been imagining what we'd do if the farm had been taken over by The Enemy and Isaac and Edmond and everyone were taken prisoner but I had to pretend they were still alive because there's no way any person with an ounce of sanity is going to walk on starvation rations for almost a week believing in the possibility of bad news.

You don't always get a chance to choose the kind of news you get.

Put yourselves in our shoes for a minute, walking into this deserted place on a glowering gray September day when it should be filled with animals and people and life but what you find is nothing, no sign of people, just the eeriest lack of noise possible and nothing moving except the big black birds in the air and legions of crows standing absolutely still, watching you.

And then we see the foxes.

My first thought was that they were beautiful, sleek and well fed and vivid orangey red with sharp little intelligent faces and it didn't occur to me till second thought to wonder why there were so many of them and why they didn't run away.

Well why would they. It was paradise. Dead things everywhere and when the stink hit you it was like nothing you ever smelled before and when you hear people say something smells like death trust them because that's the only way to describe what it smells like, putrid and rotting and so foul your stomach tries to vault out through your throat and if your brain has any sense it wants to jump out of your skull and run away as fast as possible with or without the rest of you so it doesn't ever have to find out what's making that smell.

Having come this far I didn't know how not to keep going. My legs kept walking forward and when I got a little closer I could see that some of the bodies were human and then a kind of coldness came over me and no matter what I discovered I wasn't going to scream or cry or anything.

I was ice.

The birds were pecking at a dead face in front of me, tugging at the skin and using their beaks to pull jagged purple strips of flesh free from the bone and they flew up into the air for a few seconds when I waved my arm so I could see what was left of it and by that time I knew from the size of the body and the clothes that it couldn't be Edmond and if it couldn't be Edmond it couldn't be Isaac and it wasn't Osbert either.

There were more bodies.

Seventeen in all that I could see, and only one I thought I recognized. I was pretty sure it was Dr. Jameson and the shock of seeing someone dead that I knew set off a new attack of panic. My legs started to shake against each other so hard that I had to squat down in the dirt to keep from falling over.

One by one.

One by one I approached the bodies, nice and methodical, saw how dead each one was and sometimes how young, and one by one each turned out not to be the person I most feared it would be.

They were all over the farmyard and all looked like they'd been running away, or crouching down trying to hide, or protect someone else, and when they still had faces you could even see the looks of fear and dread at least in the shape of their mouths because the eyes and lips were the first things to go. I started out trying to scare the foxes away from the bodies and I ran at them crazy with rage but they barely seemed to notice me unless I actually kicked them and then they retreated a few steps still holding on to whatever body part they were biting and looked at me dispassionately and I'm sure they could tell I was afraid.

Altogether I found nine men, three women and five children. One of the children was a girl, younger than Alby, still with her mother's arms around her. The woman looked young, but like all the women was fully dressed in dirty and bloodstained clothes so whatever funny business you expect in a war hadn't happened here other than murder in cold blood.

As for how long ago they died, I couldn't tell. Long ago enough, I guess, for their insides to start rotting and the crows and foxes to call all their friends and family around for a party.

Beyond in the covered paddocks were the animals, mostly cows and half-grown calves, nearly a hundred of them crammed together with no food, mostly dead but a few still standing and some lying down making a harsh moaning kind of noise when they breathed and when I took a few steps closer clouds of birds launched themselves a few feet into the air and then

settled right back down again and went back to pecking and fighting over the best parts and now that I was a little closer I could see the rats crawling out from inside the dead animals and foxes tugging at stinking intestines exposed through holes torn in the flesh and a feeling came over me that if I didn't get as far away from there as soon as possible I was going to start screaming and never stop.

I started to run and heard myself panting with panic and I looked around for Piper who was nowhere to be seen and I yelled PIPER PIPER PIPER barely drawing breath or giving her time to answer and there was no sign of her anywhere and the hysteria rose like the sea until I was drowning in it and I ran into the only place left which was the barn and there she was just kneeling there tears streaming silently down her face with her arms around an animal and it wasn't until I heard a faint ding when it moved that I realized who it was only I never would have recognized him because he was covered in shit and as thin as the thinnest thing that could still be alive and I guess he'd been left in there with no food for much too long and his eyes were dull but he recognized Piper and me and dinged his bell and rubbed his baby horns against Piper as best he could given that he was mostly dead.

Ding.

He was too weak to stand up and too sick to care about the water Piper brought him.

So I covered him with a grain sack and shot him in the head.

Then I took Piper back home.

We didn't even bother camping but just walked along the road as fast as we could with the strength we had left, scrambling into the bushes whenever trucks went by and staying there until it was safe.

It was never really safe. There were men with torches and we heard shouting and the trucks were passing pretty often and under different circumstances we might have felt scared.

We made slow progress.

We didn't speak but I held Piper's hand and told her over and over that I loved her through the blood beating in my veins and running down through my hand and into her fingers. Her hand started out limp and cold like a dead thing but I willed it back to life until after hours of walking the fingers started to grip mine, a little at first and then harder, and eventually I knew for sure it was still alive.

At sunset the sky cleared and turned orange and gray and pink and the temperature started to drop but to compensate there was a bright moon so we wrapped ourselves in our blankets and kept walking and following the map and what with all the stopping to hide and occasionally to rest it was nearly morning but still dark when we came through the deserted village, past the pub and the village shop, and started up the familiar long hill to the house. I expected the landscape to be barren and dead but it wasn't: the hedgerows sagged under the weight of life, berries and flowers and birds' nests. The optimism of it should have cheered me up a little but it didn't. It was like seeing a vision of some past life, a life so recent and so distant that I could remember the exhilaration without being able to remember what it felt like.

In my new incarnation, I expected nothing, good or bad.

The house looked deserted, dark and silent, even the honey-colored stone had the feeling of something abandoned. The old jeep was parked off to the side where we'd left it when the gas gave out. There were no signs of life.

No signs of death either.

I wish I could say my heart soared at the sight of it but it didn't. What heart I had left no

longer felt like flesh and blood. Lead, maybe. Or stone.

I told Piper to stay outside and she sank down with her head cradled in her arms while I crept in and looked around but I didn't have the energy or the courage for a room-by-room search so I went straight to the pantry and in the back of a low cupboard found a can of tomatoes and one of chickpeas and one of soup and a glass jar labeled Chutney that looked like it would be the last thing you'd find in the pantry when everyone was starving to death in a war but at least it was food. I smashed a hole in the top of the can of tomatoes and gave it to Piper who sucked out the juice and handed it back to me to finish.

Then as the sun started to come up we made our way slowly, wounded and exhausted, to the lambing barn.

There must have been thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of places in England that hadn't been touched by the war: the bottoms of lakes, the tops of trees, the far corners of forgotten meadows; little remote corners where no one ever went in peacetime because the place wasn't important enough or on the way to anything else or no one could be bothered to ruin it.

The lambing barn was one of them. Although it was nearly October there were still enough leaves on the trees to hide it completely from the path, and the blood froze in my veins until we pushed through the overgrown path and saw that it was still there.

It was still there, despite all the death and disease and misery and sadness and loss everywhere else. Inside it looked mercifully untouched. No one had been here since the night a thousand years ago that we all slept together, happy.

The good news was that we'd been too lazy at the time to lug everything back to the house so there were blankets still laid out on the hay, and even a few clothes the boys had left behind—T-shirts and spare jeans and socks, worn back in a universe where you wore things once and then put different things on.

Exhausted as I was, I said to Piper that I had to make sure there was nothing left of the smell of yesterday anywhere on my skin, so in the pale weak sun of early morning I rubbed myself all over with freezing water from the metal trough and put on a pair of Edmond's jeans and a T-shirt and though there was nothing left of the smell of him on them I felt better wearing his clothes. I couldn't face the filthy sweater I'd been wearing every day to keep warm and although the new clothes were a little musty, when I crawled in between the wool blankets and put my head down next to Piper's I felt almost clean and safe and best of all, home.

That night I slept the deep dreamless sleep of the dead.