

We could have moved back to the big house but we didn't.

Maybe it was too close to the road or maybe we'd turned a little wild and couldn't live in a normal house anymore. Whatever it was, we stayed up at the barn doing nothing but sleeping for almost three solid days at first, only getting up to finish off the rest of our provisions and for water and to pee in the bushes.

And then when we'd slept enough but needed a fire and something to eat, I suddenly remembered the bag Isaac brought to the barn that we hid from Piper five months or was it five years ago.

Even at the very worst times it had never occurred to me to pray but I did now.

I prayed that the mice hadn't invaded the feed bin. I prayed that the food hadn't all rotted in the summer heat. I prayed to all the gods I never believed in my whole entire life that there would be enough for Piper and maybe some left over for me.

I guess this means I now have to believe in god.

The cheese was hard and moldy on the outside but otherwise fine and there was lots of it. The fruitcake stayed perfect in the tin and the apple juice was fizzy but not totally undrinkable and the dried apricots were fine, as was the huge thick slab of chocolate wrapped in brown paper. The only thing I had to throw away was the rotten ham, which smelled enough like the awful smell at the farm to make me start retching again.

Clear October nights were turning into clear October days and though it was cold in the barn, it warmed up outside by midmorning and Piper said it was because the earth still held the heat from summer. So we laid our old blankets against the south wall of the barn and sat in the warmth of the stone wall like old ladies, drinking fermented apple juice watered down with rainwater to make it last, breaking off small pieces of cheese and fruitcake and trying to eat slowly so we didn't throw up from the shock of real food. It tasted almost too rich to eat and made our stomachs feel dizzy and we just sat there not moving, trying to repair our brains and our bodies with slow swallows of food and water and with peace and idleness and familiar surroundings.

After a few days like this we went to bed deciding that the next morning we would walk back to the house and see what we might find there so I guess that meant we were turning back into something human again.

In the middle of that night I woke up and heard something rustling down below us in the barn and my first thought was Edmond! and my second was Oh god here we go again and my third thought was that maybe it was a rat and we should check that the food was safe but there was something about the way it sounded that was familiar and as I went to sit up I saw Piper's eyes suddenly wide open and awake and the first smile I'd seen on her face in so long and she whistled in a soft way and The Thing gave a little yip and I almost laughed out loud being the last one to realize it was Jet.

We raced down to him and he was much thinner with a ragged-looking coat but otherwise he seemed fine and happy to see us and he just lay there on his back in the most undignified way, wriggling with pleasure as we rubbed him and hugged him and kissed him and told him how much we'd missed him.

Then I left Piper with him and went over and got a chunk of cheese and one of fruitcake out of the feed bin and fed it to him as slowly as I could though it didn't seem to matter since he

wolfed it down without chewing and it was only not knowing how long we were going to be living on this food that stopped me from giving him all of it, he seemed so hungry.

We were too excited to sleep and neither of us wanted to let Jet out of our sight so we half carried half dragged him up into the loft which he wasn't exactly wild about but in the end we all three lay down, Jet a little separate from Piper and with Piper's hand around his front paw for security and me with my hand around Piper's front paw also for security and that's how we slept.

The trip down to the house took a lot of strength, physical and mental, and we didn't have much left. Without saying anything I braced myself for the worst and what we found wasn't the worst, but the house was pretty well trashed and it was a little like being kicked again when you're already down.

The lights and telephone were still out. There were no messages, no notes, nothing that told us where to find Edmond and Isaac but on the good side there were also no smashed windows or shit spread around on the walls just for the sake of it. A lot of the furniture had been thrown out in the barn and most of the rest was shoved into the corners of rooms or turned upside down and there were broken dishes everywhere and the ones that weren't broken were caked and filthy and the toilets were overflowing and there was mud and dirt all over the rugs and I guess the only reason our clothes hadn't been touched was that they were too small for anyone to have bothered with.

The kitchen was the worst and I guess even army guys like to spend lots of time in the kitchen and the big table was covered with heaps of paper. There were maps drawn on the wall and no food except what I'd found in the pantry that first day and when Piper and I went to check the barn next door there was no sign of the chickens or sheep or any other animals, which didn't tell us whether they'd been set loose or taken away or served up to the army for lunch.

In the main bedrooms things were a little better with furniture just pushed to one side and fairly clean. I had to hold my breath before opening the door to my little room but stepping inside I was surrounded by those walls pure white and centuries old and everything pretty much the same as the day I left except the daffodils dead and papery in the bottle. I picked up a blanket from the floor and smoothed it onto the bed and looked out the window at the world outside and remembered arriving in a jeep with Edmond.

I could still hear our voices in the walls.

Before I went out I opened the little chest of drawers to find clean clothes all neatly folded and right then I forgot about everything except wanting to be clean.

I looked in the big mirror in the hall which was a mistake because for a minute I didn't recognize the person I saw there, including how thin I looked and how dirty and how matted my hair was and the next thing I did was to check the water in the taps which it turned out didn't work without the pump. Piper helped me lug buckets of water up the stairs from the rain barrel in the garden and I filled the bath a little way and with a bar of Aunt Penn's soap, a bottle of shampoo and a room full of clean clothes I started to reinvent myself as a person.

If you've ever worn the same clothes day and night for weeks, you'll know how amazing it feels when you make your skin silky and smooth again, and how happy you can be just cutting your fingernails and scrubbing the dirt out of your hands and feet with good soap that smells like roses and then putting on clean clothes and brushing your CLEAN hair and letting it dry all soft and whispery-sounding in the sun.

We filled it again for Piper's turn in the bath and then she made me go up to her bedroom to choose some clothes for her because she didn't want to go herself. I don't know what she was scared of but she was adamant that she wouldn't go, in the way little children are adamant that there might be something hiding in the closet in the dark. I guess she was scared of the ghosts that were creeping all around the house and I couldn't blame her.

I picked out some clothes for her including a clean white shirt, which I knew was completely impractical but the luxury of being clean and impractical was too much to resist. I also packed a bag with sensible things like jeans and sweaters with hoods and underwear, and socks to wear at night on our hands and feet in case of bugs.

When we were both clean and dressed in new clothes and had moved the furniture back where it belonged as best we could in the sitting room we felt pretty cheered up. I think the best feeling was throwing away the filthy sneakers I'd been wearing every day for over a month now and putting on a pair of loafers from my previous life that felt new and expensive and smelled like leather.

We had to do something about Jet because he kept biting at the burrs stuck in his coat but he was definitely against the idea of a bath and the best we could do was find his dog brush in the mudroom and take it up to the barn and try to clean up the tangled mess of his coat which didn't please him much either. We also took a bag of dry dog food that was still in the pantry because feeding ourselves was enough of a problem without having to figure out how to feed Jet. It was heavy and a pain to carry but neither of us knew whether he could manage for himself catching squirrels and rabbits.

Back up at the barn I carefully stowed our booty: matches, soap, clean clothes, more blankets, dog food, a single candle I found under a chair, and some books. Collecting anything more than that would have required a second trip and when you're tired and underfed, two miles cross-country feels like more than enough.

That evening Piper disappeared while I was still sitting outside in the last warmth of the day and after a while I went to find her and she had gone on her own into a corner of the barn wrapped in a blanket hugging Jet and was crying almost silently, her nose and eyes red and swollen and her mouth open as the tears flowed out of her like a bottomless well.

I didn't have to ask why she was crying. The fact that we were clean and more or less safe just made the absences more glaring and for all my longing after Edmond at least I'd come to terms with losing my mother a long time ago but all Piper had left out of a mother and three brothers was me, a dog, and a whole lot of unanswered questions.

I wanted to tell someone that this was it, the last straw, I couldn't go on anymore with my own misery plus Piper's, which was so much worse. I felt full of rage and despair, like Job shaking his fist at god, and all I could do was sit with her and stroke her hair and murmur enough, enough, because that's what we'd both had.

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We couldn't go on. We went on.

Staying alive was what we did to pass the time.

Ages ago I learned in social studies about how the Cavemen and the Bushmen and other Primitive Tribes spent every waking hour searching for food and it was nice to be able to draw a good straight line through history between Hairy Old Neanderthal Man and us. I was thinking of approaching my old school next time I was in New York and telling them to replace

the unit on Media Communications with one on How to Survive Half Dead in the Wild Without Much in the Way of Hope.

Luckily there was a fair amount of stuff around to eat just now, it being autumn the season of Fruitfulness and Thanksgiving etc., but I won't pretend it was an interesting diet and I could have killed for a grilled cheese and tomato sandwich on rye and a Diet Coke, which come to think of it was pretty radical for me and if only some of my thousand shrinks were here to pat themselves on the back and take the credit.

Anyway there were lots of potatoes because in order to get to the barn you had to walk along an entire field planted with potatoes and though the army guys living at our house had obviously noticed this too, there are still only so many potatoes a small platoon of hungry sequesterers can eat in a month especially without any of the essential ingredients for mashed, French fried or potato salad. In other words, we still had about nine-tenths of a field left to eat.

I spent most mornings digging potatoes and carrying them back to the barn to store in the feed bins while Piper went off searching for natural morsels like watercress and sweet chestnuts and honey. As usual, she cornered the Wood Nymph market while I settled for Old Faithful.

Some days when I couldn't bear to dig up another spud, I went with her, and seeing Piper in full flight you realized that whoever the father of these kids was, he had to be some kind of bona fide Pixie. She knew how to follow honeybees back to their hives and then how to get honeycomb out of them by making a torch out of a green branch so it smoked and the bees either flew away or got dopey enough to let her break off a chunk of the comb without stinging her, but to be safe I watched this operation from as far away as possible.

One day she showed me about getting watercress out of a river and explained that you had to get it out of a RUNNING river otherwise it would destroy your liver. What about a meandering river I wondered to myself. This is one of the things I most dislike about nature, namely that the rules are not at all precise. Like when Piper says I'm pretty sure that mushroom isn't poisonous.

Anyway I didn't really know what to do with a big fat sticky dripping honeycomb or a couple of fistfuls of watercress other than sending them to some factory where they'd be wrapped up in Styrofoam and plastic, but amazingly they tasted just like honey and watercress without having to do anything at all to them and what with digging up potatoes as well, I was starting to think that except for the deli counters and five or ten thousand other total essentials, supermarkets were pretty much a waste of time.

In the meantime I learned the hard way to store things like honey in a tightly covered container if you didn't want to get every bug on earth flying in for a taste.

Piper could smell wild garlic and onions in a meadow and she came home with armfuls of the stuff, which we shredded up to make potatoes with wild onions and garlic for a change from potatoes without wild onions and garlic. There were days I would happily have traded the entire future of England for a single jar of mayonnaise but unfortunately the opportunity never arose.

We roasted sweet chestnuts in the fire and they were pretty good except incredibly hard to peel and the skins got under your fingernails and hurt for days. I spent practically a whole afternoon collecting chestnuts and when I got back Piper looked at me with as close as she ever got to contempt and said Those are Horse Chestnuts and Inedible.

There were a few rows of sweet corn in Aunt Penn's vegetable garden, along with

whatever cabbages hadn't been eaten by the British Army and the slug army, and also a fair number of squashes, some leeks and beans and mint running wild.

I brought a heavy frying pan up from the house and because we had no cooking oil we steamed vegetables in water over the fire. Piper said we should catch a rabbit and kill it for the fat to cook with but when I looked to see if she was out of her mind she got kind of defensive and said That's what the Boy Scout Handbook says.

A few days later Piper said we should try a fishing expedition and the thought of it made my heart sink because of our Perfect Day and not wanting ever to go there again and ruin it, but nostalgia wasn't a big part of the decision-making process these days so we got Piper's fishing rod and set off.

It was cloudy and drizzling which Piper said was good for fishing and as usual I watched while she lured food onto the bank, but once she caught anything I had to follow her directions about killing and cleaning it while she turned her head away. I had no complaints about Piper but I could have lived without ripping the guts out of dead trout to save her from doing it. Not to mention whacking them over the head with a club in the first place. I hated doing it but I COULD do it and I guess that was the difference between us.

Later there was poached pink trout that made most of the things you eat in life taste gross by comparison, followed by hazelnuts mashed up with honey and afterwards we had mint tea and it was nice but you couldn't help lying awake at night thinking about toast and butter.

In the days that followed we figured out how to make soup from whatever we could add to a pot and that was much better than just boiling things one by one. Leek and potato was the best and when we ran out of leeks we used wild onions.

We set as much as we could store aside. There were only two feed bins in the barn built to keep out mice and I'd already stacked one with potatoes and the other halfway with nuts and corn and cabbages. What we really needed was a huge Amana refrigerator-freezer with ice maker and root beer dispenser.

One funny thing was that I didn't look much different now from the day I arrived in England but the difference was that now I ate what I could.

Somewhere along the line I'd lost the will not to eat.

Partly I wouldn't be good old Daisy if I didn't get my appetite back just when everyone else in the world was learning how to starve, and partly the idea of wanting to be thin in a world full of people dying from lack of food struck even me as stupid.

Well what do you know?

Every war has its silver lining.

I knew Edmond would come back to us if he could.

I tried doing the thing they do with dogs in the movies, saying JET FETCH EDMOND! and pointing in the general direction of the Wide World but he didn't bound off like Lassie following a hot scent, just sat down and stared at me politely for a few seconds and then lost interest when it turned out I wasn't going to clarify my request.

Can't you at least send Jet to look for Gin? I asked Piper in a What Kind of Dog Whisperer Are You tone of voice. But she shook her head and said He'd find her if he knew where to look.

We both looked over at him sitting with his nose slightly raised into the breeze.

See, Piper said, he's keeping tabs on the neighborhood. All the smells from miles around are filtering past his nose.

I came across Piper deep in conversation with Jet one afternoon and when I asked her what they were talking about she shrugged and said Dog Things. Sometimes the loneliness of being the odd man out in these conversations got to me but most of the time I just ignored it. I like old movies. She talks to dogs.

As the days passed and there was no sign of Edmond or Isaac I had to fight the unbearable fear that always lurked at the back of my mind. It took a long time to admit that I could no longer feel his presence and sometimes I lay awake until dawn listening desperately to the silence and trying to remember his face.

Sometimes I thought I heard Edmond's voice in my head but it always turned out to be my subconscious replaying old tapes out of some perverse kind of nostalgia.

I denied what appeared to be fact.

And yet, I had seen the dead people. I had looked carefully at every hideous, nightmare face just to be sure.

I found myself drawn more and more to the big house just to make sure Edmond wasn't waiting for us there, or had managed to drag himself that far but no farther.

I made excuses to Piper about being gone for a few hours, or just told her I'd found something in the vegetable garden that would be ripe any day now like tomatoes or maybe we needed something like more clean socks. She didn't mind my going alone because she didn't much like going there herself on account of the ghosts and also she probably more or less knew why I was going and was glad to have someone checking on the off chance.

She always took Jet with her for company so I had no early-warning system and every time I approached the house I searched for portents, strange cloud patterns, thirteen magpies, frogs the size of antelopes, that sort of thing. Some days I was convinced I could sense something or I experienced an uncanny mystical feeling but it won't make the six o'clock news if I tell you I was always wrong.

It didn't matter. Each time my heart would race at the smallest suggestion that we had company. Usually it was a moth thudding against a window. Or mice. Or nothing at all.

Once there I tried to put things back where they belonged.

I moved furniture. Swept rugs. Washed plates with cold water and bars of soap. Scrubbed dirt off walls.

Sometimes I just sat in the room that Edmond shared with Isaac, hoping something would happen.

Sometimes I put on his clothes and drifted around the house looking for something but I didn't know what.

I frightened myself. I became the ghost Piper was so scared of.

One day we went down to the house together because Piper wanted a bath. There was no use pretending I had a premonition when Piper was around because if any manifestation was going to make itself manifest, it wasn't going to be to me.

We had to haul buckets in as usual and the bath was cold but at least it took place in a bathtub, and then we sat around for a little while in the garden and swapped books we'd read for unread ones and I guess it was a little like going to a movie in the olden days before the war, something different to do.

For a while there was total peace and quiet, with nothing but the sound of Piper humming quietly and a chiffchaff chiff-chaffing in the apple tree and me turning the pages of a book.

Then the telephone rang.

It was such an unfamiliar sound we forgot how to react.

For an eternity neither of us moved.

Piper sat terrified. Eyes wide.

But I've never left a ringing phone in my life and I wasn't going to start now.

I brought the receiver up to my ear but said nothing.

Hello? said the voice and for a moment I couldn't place it.

Hello? it said again, and then in a pleading tone: Whoever you are, please say something.

And then I recognized the voice.

Hello, I said. It's Daisy.

**End of Part One**

