

Six years.

My fantasies were as constant as I was: Edmond and me. Living some sort of life.

That was it. I never bothered filling in the details. The details didn't matter.

The day was warm and Edmond was outdoors, sitting carefully upright on a lawn chair in the white garden, his eyes half closed. He sat facing away from us and Piper went and knelt in front of him.

"Edmond," she whispered, her hand resting lightly on his knee. "Edmond, look who's come."

He turned his head then and I couldn't even move toward him or make my face have an expression.

He was thin, much thinner than I am now, his face worn. Where Isaac was lean and graceful, he just looked gaunt.

His eyes narrowed slightly and he turned his head back away from me and closed them again. Closed the subject.

I wasn't prepared.

Piper pulled a metal folding chair over and pushed me into it and went off to make tea and at first I just looked at him and eventually he looked back with his eyes the color of unsettled weather. His arms were covered in scars—some new, some healing over, some disappearing into thin white lines. I could see the same thin lines etched around his neck and he'd developed a nervous habit of running his fingers along the ridges over and over again.

Edmond . . .

I didn't know how to continue.

Not that it mattered. To him I was still thousands of miles away. The borders were still closed.

I sat there, awkward, not knowing what to do. I wanted to touch him but when he opened his eyes again the expression in them was poison.

Piper came back with the tea. Good old reliable English tea. Two world wars ago, battlefield nurses gave cups of tea to the wounded and it leaked through their bullet holes and killed them.

I turned and looked at the garden, meticulously tended, by whom, I wondered. The child angel had been cleared of moss and planted all around with snowdrops and white narcissus that poured out an overpowering scent. I thought of the ghost of that long-dead child, watching us, its desiccated bones sunk deep into the ground below.

On the warm stone walls, climbing roses were just coming into bloom and great twisted branches of honeysuckle and clematis wrestled each other as they tumbled up and over the top of the wall. Against another wall were white apple blossoms on branches cut into sharp crucifixes and forced to lie flat against the stone. Below, the huge frilled lips of giant tulips in shades of white and cream nodded in their beds. They were almost finished now, spread open too far, splayed, exposing obscene black centers. I've never had my own garden but I suddenly recognized something in the tangle of this one that wasn't beauty. Passion, maybe. And something else. Rage.

It was Edmond, I thought. I recognized him in the plants.

I turned back and met his eyes, hard and angry and unyielding.

It was such a beautiful day. Warm and full of life. I couldn't reconcile it with this scene. Piper looked at me and smiled a small tired smile.

"Give him time," she said as though he couldn't hear us at all.

Well what choice did I have?

After that day, I could barely enter the garden without a huge effort of will. The air was suffocating, charged, the hungry plants sucking at the earth with their ferocious appetites. You could almost watch them grow, pressing their fat green tongues up through the black earth. They emerged selfish and starving, gasping for air.

Once inside, I couldn't breathe. I felt claustrophobic, choked, desperately thinking bright thoughts so Edmond couldn't get inside my head and know how terrified and furious and guilty I felt. But I don't think he even tried.

And still he sat there, as still and as cold as the statue of the dead child.

I sat with him for a shorter and shorter time each day as my fear took over and the grasping whiteness of the garden blinded me.

I thought of excuses, involved myself totally in the farm. There was plenty of work to do so I could fool myself that no one noticed the obvious. It was like not eating. Everyone knew.

After a few days I found myself alone in the barn with Isaac. Piper had gone to meet Jonathan, returning from a week at the hospital. Travel was so difficult that it made sense for him to stay for long stretches without coming home.

For once Isaac looked at me directly, the way he looked at the dogs.

"Talk to him," he said with no preface.

"I can't."

"Why else did you come?"

"He won't listen."

"He is listening. He can't help listening. It's what caused all the trouble for him in the first place."

I knew any of them would tell me the whole story but I didn't dare ask. I didn't dare know.

I looked at Isaac's eyes with their strange mix of warmth and dispassion. I could see that he suffered for Edmond as much as he could suffer for another human being.

And suddenly the thing inside that had kept me focused all these years rose in my throat like vomit. It was as strong as poison and for once I didn't fight it down or try to reshape it as something polite.

"IF HE'S LISTENING SO HARD," I shouted, "WHY CAN'T HE HEAR THAT THE ONLY WAY I'VE MANAGED TO SURVIVE EVERY DAY FOR ALL THESE YEARS IS BECAUSE OF HIM?"

"He knows," Isaac said. "He's just forgotten how to believe it."

I said nothing for a long time.

"The garden frightens me."

"Yes," he said.

We stared into each other's eyes and I saw what I needed to see.

"Keep telling him," he said calmly, and then went back to feeding the pigs.

There was nothing else to do. I kept telling him. I returned to the garden and sat with him hour after hour saying it again and again, and most of the time I could feel the doors slammed shut so he didn't have to listen. But I was determined.

LISTEN TO ME YOU BASTARD.

He didn't move.

LISTEN TO ME.

In the end something happened. In the end, the warmth and the scent and the heavy slow buzz of bees seduced me, worked on my brain like opium, so the tightly clenched core of fear and fury that had sustained me all these years began to unfurl.

I began to open too.

I love you, I told him at last. And then I told him over and over, until the words no longer sounded like words.

And finally he turned to me, his eyes dull, and he spoke.

“Then why did you leave me?”

And so I tried to explain about our journey and the day Piper and I were at the house looking for him as usual and the phone ringing and my father's voice at the other end and how for all those years I wished I hadn't picked up the phone that day but I did and by the time I realized what his plan was for me there was nothing I could do because he knew where I was and he had International Connections and despite all my journeys and triumphs over adversity I was still just a fifteen-year-old kid stuck in a war, powerless in the face of an Official Medical Certificate Requiring Immediate Hospitalization. Abroad.

My father thought he was doing what was best for me.

Edmond turned his face away. Of course he knew the story. He must have heard it a hundred times from Piper.

I guess he had to hear it from me.

I leaned over and took both his hands in mine and pressed them to my face and when he tried to pull away I wouldn't let him. And then, not caring whether he was listening or not, I told him everything else. I told him about all the years reliving every second of our time together, the years trying to find him, the years of nothing and nobody else. And every minute of every year I was trying to come home.

We sat there as day turned to twilight and twilight to evening and the moon rose and the constellations moved across the sky and I talked and he listened and it took almost all night to tell him everything but I didn't stop until there was nothing left to tell. And when I finally went to let go of his hands because mine were cold and exhausted and cramped, I couldn't.

We sat like that, close together in the white garden, lit by the cold white light of the stars, with only each other for warmth.

“OK,” he said finally, and he said it out loud, his voice odd and strained, like he'd forgotten how to speak.

That was it. OK.

And then he freed his hands and took mine, stiff and icy cold, and wrapped them in his, which were warm.

It was a start.

According to Piper, after The Occupation finished most of the young men were drafted into the army and a good proportion of the urban population began to redistribute itself toward the countryside where it was supposed to be safer. Cooperatives sprang up to handle the farmwork and try to keep everyone fed.

Piper met Jonathan through their cooperative; he worked with one of the doctors and she ran the milking barns. There was no need for courtship; they simply met one day and were together after that.

He lived with them now; it was Jonathan who answered my phone call from London. He and Piper made a good couple. Where she was serious and gentle he was intense and humorous, utterly engaged in the world in a way none of her family really was.

I liked him immediately. As outsiders, we both saw our role somewhere in the quadrant of Privileged Caretakers.

I knew he protected her when he could.

Jonathan told me all about the years that followed my departure. Eventually the schools reopened, farm shops sold food, distribution networks sprang up and the black market offered everything from imported drugs to new shoes if you could afford to pay.

"It's been a bad time for so many people," he said, and Piper looked at her hands. "So many deaths."

"Tell me what happened," I said finally, late one evening when the sky was striped pink and gold and the garden was lit with the last rays of the setting sun.

I knew that Edmond and Isaac had survived, but that's all I knew. I didn't know how, or what they'd seen. What they'd done.

Piper remained silent, and so it was from Jonathan that I heard the last piece of the story.

According to Jonathan, Edmond and Isaac had lived peacefully at Gateshead Farm throughout the summer, as Piper and I had at Reston Bridge. Then things started to change. The atmosphere darkened, they heard reports of violence and unrest, and both Edmond and Isaac knew, in the way they knew things, that something bad was going to happen. They tried to warn people, tried to talk to Dr. Jameson. He listened, was sympathetic. But he knew it would take an immense leap of faith for anyone to act. The small community was too settled and too frightened to run and hide in the woods because of something in the air and the premonitions of a couple of kids. It wasn't enough to make them leave. You can't really blame them, especially now.

Isaac knew that his first responsibility was to survive, and to make sure Edmond survived. But Edmond didn't see it that way. The way he saw it, if they left, they abandoned all those people to certain death. For the first time, they fought, and Isaac proved the stronger of the two. He turned the full force of his will on Edmond. Bullied him. He did what was required to make sure they escaped alive. And they did. But it divided them; Isaac could live with the consequences and Edmond couldn't.

They went into hiding together, but it was too dangerous. The area was swarming with soldiers and vigilantes and Isaac knew that in order to survive, they'd have to keep moving. He tried to convince Edmond to return home, but he wouldn't, or maybe he couldn't. In the end, Isaac did what he never thought was possible, and that was to leave Edmond behind. Maybe he

hoped Edmond would follow him.

“Isaac hid for some time in the village.”

Jonathan looked at Piper and she looked away.

“He arrived here two days after you left.”

I gasped as if I'd been punched hard in the stomach. The things that break your heart when you think there's nothing left to break.

Jonathan took a deep breath.

“When Isaac left, Edmond went back to Gateshead, even though he knew how dangerous it was. He had worked and lived side by side with every one of those people for months and perhaps he felt that if he could warn them better, make it clearer, force them to listen, he could save them.

“Well, obviously he couldn't. He must have given up at last, escaped when he saw there was nothing more he could do.”

Jonathan shook his head.

“How all those people, including the children, would have hidden in the woods with no food . . .”

He paused.

“There were thousands of stories just like this one, and mostly they didn't end happily.”

None of us said a word.

Jonathan took another breath and continued.

“We don't know exactly what happened next, but you know what happened at Gateshead. You and Piper know better than anyone. Soon afterwards, Edmond was found a few miles away by soldiers, not our soldiers. He was half dead with starvation and you can imagine what else. They held him for over a month but didn't harm him, except that there was never enough food and they didn't bother wasting what they had on him. We don't know why they kept him alive, they just did. In the end, they got so used to him and the fact that he never tried to move or speak or escape, that he just stood up one day and walked off. He walked home. God knows how he made it to the house, but he did, and that's where Piper and Isaac found him, sick and starving and silent. They managed to get him up to the lambing barn where they were hiding, but he wouldn't speak at all or tell them what happened. Not for—”

He looked at Piper.

“More than a year.”

“You've seen what he's done to himself,” Jonathan said. “As if he hadn't suffered, or been punished enough. And for what? For being alive, I guess.”

We didn't say anything for a long time.

Finally Piper spoke, her voice soft.

“And then there was the garden. It took a long time for him to do anything other than sit in a chair, but he started, slowly, just digging and helping with the vegetables, and still not saying much of anything, and each day he did more. It helped him, you could see how much it helped him. He weeded and pruned and dug up old bulbs and put them away for the winter, and collected seed and labeled it, and when spring came he started to plant things and not just for food, for—for something else.”

She looked at me.

“He'd never cared that much for the garden before, but once he started working he was compulsive, tireless. Day after day he worked until well after dark, and there was no point

calling him in. He couldn't stop even if he'd wanted to.

“It was worse for him in winter, with so much less to do, but even then we'd find him out in the snow, clearing off branches so they wouldn't break and wrapping plants in sacks and hay to keep them from freezing. Sometimes his intensity was frightening, but afterwards he seemed calmer. He's never told us about going back to Gateshead, or what happened when he was with the soldiers. We never heard from him what happened after he and Isaac split up. Jonathan found out most of it from people who saw him, who knew what was going on. He's locked it inside and this is how it comes out.”

She pointed to the dense thorny branches of a Blood Rose, cut and pinioned into cruel horizontals against the wall, yet still wild and heavy with dark red blooms. We watched a honeybee lurch from one fat flower to the next, drunk and staggering under the weight of all that botanical destiny.

And suddenly I knew something with terrifying clarity. I knew Edmond had witnessed the massacre. Seen the people murdered in cold blood, the men and women, and the children, dying, the animals murdered or left to starve. I don't know how he survived and I probably never will know, but I knew unequivocally that he was there.

I couldn't begin to imagine the effect on him. I didn't have to.

I looked at Piper. I could see in her eyes that she didn't know. Jonathan wouldn't have guessed. As for Isaac? Doesn't he know everything that happens to any one of us?

“That's it,” Piper said. “That's the end.”

But I knew it wasn't. They'd left out a chapter.

The one where the hero comes home to find me gone.

6

I became a gardener, of sorts.

It was the only way to talk to him, not with words, but with hard work and the feel of old tools, and with fat bulbs buried and waiting deep in the rich soil. I watched him and learned from him, digging and planting and making things grow. At first he didn't help me, but I didn't need his help. I just needed to be there with him in the sunshine, planting tiny seeds in the crumbling earth and willing them to flower.

Now we walk, and he talks to me sometimes, tells me the names of the plants we come across in the field. They're hard to remember and there are too many of them, and the only ones I manage to keep in my head are the ones that saved my life.

Corylus avellana. Hazelnuts. *Rubus fruticosus*. Blackberries. *Agaricus campestris*. Field mushrooms. *Rorippa nasturtium-aquaticum*. Watercress. *Allium ursinum*. Wild garlic. *Malus domestica*. Apples.

Sometimes we sit together the way we did a thousand years ago and we don't say a word but just listen to the thrushes and the skylarks. He even smiles occasionally, remembering, and that's when I turn sideways and look at his face, trace his scars with my finger and without speaking I tell him again and again that I'm home.

And so, after all this time, we're together, Edmond and I.

The facts of his existence are plain. I know that he will never silence those unspeakable voices. He heard how people killed, and how they died, and their voices infected him, coursed through his body, poisoned him. He didn't know how to turn off the noise, or turn the hate back out onto the world like the rest of us. He turned it on himself. You could see that from the scars

on him.

Isaac survived because he listened to animals. He could help them, which makes pain bearable. And Piper? Piper had me. By saving Piper I saved myself, and all the things that might have killed us were also the things that saved us. Saved from the ravages of war by stubbornness and ignorance and an insatiable hunger for love.

I have no idea how damaged Edmond is, I just know that he needs peace and he needs to be loved. And both those things I can do.

So now I'm here with him, and with Piper and Isaac and Jonathan and the cows and the horses and the sheep and the dogs, and the garden, and all the hard work of running a farm and staying alive in a country deformed and misshapen by war.

I know all about those conditions, only this time they're outside of me. And anyway, fighting back is what I've discovered I do best.

After all this time, I know exactly where I belong.

Here. With Edmond.

And that's how I live now.