

I hardly saw Osbert that week because he went to school, unlike Isaac and Edmond and Piper, who were supposed to be homeschooled, which as far as I could tell meant reading whatever books you happen to be interested in, and every once in a blue moon having Aunt Penn say Have you learned any geography? and them saying yes.

Now this was clearly one of the greatest improvements on the education system since time began and I was greatly looking forward to being enrolled but Aunt Penn said that I didn't have to do much of anything until autumn term, which didn't start until September, and by that time no one was going to school anyway due to the You Know What.

Without anyone making a big deal of it or punching me on the shoulder and saying You're OK Cousin Daisy like they do on TV, Piper and Edmond and Isaac and I started doing pretty much everything together, though sometimes I forgot to count Isaac because he could go days without saying a single word. I knew Aunt Penn wasn't worried about him because I heard her say to someone that he'd speak when he was ready to speak, but all I could think was in New York that kid would have been stuck in a straitjacket practically from birth and dangled over a tank full of Educational Consultants and Remedial Experts all snapping at his ankles for the next twenty years arguing about his Special Needs and getting paid plenty for it.

I went quietly down to Aunt Penn's office a few nights later hoping I might be able to send some e-mails to all the people who must have thought I'd disappeared off the face of the earth and there was a light under the door and Aunt Penn's voice said Edmond? I thought at first I'd say nothing, just sneak away, but at the last minute I changed my mind and said No, it's Daisy. Aunt Penn said Oh Daisy please come in, and she looked so happy to see me and said Sit by the fire a minute. Even though it was April it was freezing cold at night and she said You wouldn't believe what it costs to heat this drafty old house.

I huddled up close to the fire and she put her work away saying she'd done more than enough for one night and when she saw I was still shivering she got up from her chair and wrapped a blanket around me, all the time with a look on her face like a smile only sadder and then she sat down next to me on the sofa and started telling me about her sister and it took me a second to realize the person she meant was my mother.

She told me things I never knew like how her sister was all set to go to university to study history when she fell in love with my father and decided not to go after all, which made their father furious. When she went away to live in America hardly any of the family was speaking to her. Then from the top of her desk Aunt Penn took down a framed picture of two young women looking almost the same, one of them laughing and one looking serious and holding on to the neck of a huge wild-looking gray dog Aunt Penn said was called Lady, As a joke because she had no manners at all, but look how your mother adored her.

I've seen plenty of pictures of my mother at home, but almost always with my father and not a single one taken before he knew her, so this was strange because she looked so different, happy and young like someone you've known in another life. Aunt Penn said I could keep the photograph but I said No thank you because it seemed to belong to that desk and that room, and I didn't want to drag it away to a foreign place.

Aunt Penn rubbed one hand across her eyes and said it was late and we both needed to go to bed but just as I was getting to the door she said When your mother phoned to tell me she was pregnant, she sounded happier than she'd ever sounded in her whole life about that baby.

Which was you, Daisy. Then she told me to run upstairs before I caught cold but it seemed like hours before I stopped shivering.

The next day Aunt Penn set off for Oslo and we didn't think much about it except that we were in charge and pretty happy about it, but later when you look back on the whole story you realize that the moment she left was exactly the moment we all started skewing off into crisis like how Archduke Ferdinand getting killed started WWI even though the connection, to me at least, was never that clear.

At the time she just kissed each of us and smiled and told us to be sensible and there was something about the way she didn't even miss a beat when it came to kissing me that made me feel better than almost all the nice things that had happened since I arrived.

We didn't get much of a chance to sit back and enjoy being orphans before things started happening.

The first thing that happened wasn't our fault. That was a bomb that went off in the middle of a big train station in London the day after Aunt Penn went to Oslo and something like seven or seventy thousand people got killed.

This obviously went over very badly with the populace at large and was pretty scary etc. but to be honest it didn't seem to have that much to do with us way off in the country. How it did affect us was it made them close all the airports, which meant no one could get home for the foreseeable future, namely Aunt Penn. None of us dared to say that having no parents at all was pretty cool, but you didn't have to be a mind reader to figure it out. Basically we couldn't believe our luck, and for a little while it felt like we were on some big train rolling down a hill, and all we cared about was how great it felt to be going fast.

That same day after the first bomb went off everyone just sat glued to the television and the radio, and the telephone kept ringing asking us if we were OK, but given we were about four million miles from the epicenter I'd say we stood a pretty good chance of surviving.

Of course everyone was talking about food shortages and shutting down transportation and calling up all the able-bodied men and basically all the Gloom and Doom stuff they could possibly think up in the limited time allotted, and the guys on the radio were talking in solemn voices asking anyone they could drag off the street Whether This Meant War and then we had to listen to all the solemn experts pretending to have the inside track when any one of them would have given his left arm to know the game plan himself.

Eventually my father got through from the office and I guess hearing my voice convinced him I was still alive and there was nothing to worry about because afterwards we had our usual conversation, him saying How are you do you need any money or want to come home and me just answering yes yes no no whatever. He said they were all worried about me but I couldn't think who THEY might be and then he said he had a meeting so he had to go but he loved me and when I didn't say anything he hung up.

Well I couldn't take much more of all the blah blah blah so Edmond and I walked down the long hill to the village which was extremely picturesque and full of little houses all connected up and made out of the same yellowy stone as our house. It wasn't very big but there were lots of little roads with identical houses except for different knickknacks in the windows spreading out on either side of the main street and Edmond said it was big enough to have a weekly market and three bakeries, two butchers, a church originally from the twelfth century, a tea shop, two pubs (one good, one bad, the bad one with a hotel), a number of lifelong drunks, at least one suspected child molester, and a shoe store that also sold raincoats and waterproof

boots and footballs and penny candy and Tweety Bird backpacks.

There was one building near the center that was a little bigger and squarer than all the rest and that was the town hall and across from it was a cobbled square where the market appeared every Wednesday and in one corner diagonally opposite was one of the pubs. It was named The Salmon because of the fishmonger next door but when the fishmonger shut down no one bothered to change the name. In the other corner was a Ye Olde English version of a 7-Eleven, which for some reason was also a post office and a drugstore and sold newspapers out front if all else failed.

We went in, and with the money Aunt Penn left for the weekend bought as much bottled water and canned things as we could carry home which was a lot more fun than staring at the same old picture of smoking carnage on TV and we tried to be very mature about the kind of food we might need in a siege, which let's face it, wasn't the most likely scenario for the back of beyond. We weren't the only ones at the shop, but people were still fairly friendly especially to two kids on their own and no one tried to kick us to the ground and steal our pear halves.

That still left a whole afternoon with the end of the world about to happen, so we walked back up the hill to the house, more slowly this time because of all the bottled water, and when we got there Edmond decided we should move up and camp at the lambing barn because it was over a mile away from the house and so well hidden behind a group of big oak trees that no one would find it if they didn't know what they were looking for. We figured if The Enemy was going to come all the way down here, we'd better think of a way to make ourselves totally invisible, though in fact the main reason was that it was something to do.

So Piper and Isaac and Edmond and I started dragging provisions and blankets and books up to the lambing barn, which was usually just used to store hay, and except for the mice it was comfortable and dry and had water for when it was used for lambing, so we told Osbert we were staying up there for the foreseeable future, but he barely seemed to notice because he was busy watching nothing happening on the news and calling his friends and looking worried trying to figure out along with sixty million other people whether we were In A War or Not.

Anyway, it was around midafternoon that we settled in and Piper brought Osbert's Boy Scout Survival Guide and decided that we had to collect and cook all our own food, so she hiked all the way back to the house and gathered some blue eggs and dug up some early potatoes from the next field over and threatened to dry worms on a stone and grind them into powder to add protein to stews. Since none of us was short of protein except me and I was used to it, we managed to convince her to save the worm powder for a rainy day and she looked a little crestfallen but didn't press the point.

While she was foraging for food Isaac arrived from the house with a big straw bag full of cheese and ham and a fruitcake in a tin and dried apricots and a big bottle of apple juice and a thick slab of plain chocolate wrapped in brown paper.

We hid the bag in a feedbox so we wouldn't hurt Piper's feelings and what she served in the end wasn't exactly a meal fit for a king, but it had the right feel for an emergency. Edmond and Isaac made a fire and baked the potatoes right in it, and then when it died down Piper put the eggs in the coals on the side and though some turned out sort of raw on the side that wasn't toward the fire, they apparently tasted OK.

I told them I was too excited to eat anything, and that seemed fine with everyone except Edmond who looked at me in his way as usual and I noticed that once you realize someone's

watching you it's pretty hard not to find yourself watching them back.

Afterwards we made up one big bed in the hayloft by putting blankets down and we took our shoes off and got in together, still in our clothes, first Isaac, then Edmond, then Me and then Piper in that order and though we kept a decent distance at first, eventually we just gave up and moved together because of the bats flying all around, and the sound of the crickets or frogs which can be quite lonely, and the cold night and the thought of all those dead people a million miles away in London. I wasn't used to sleeping that close to anyone else and much as I liked having Piper always holding on to my hand it kind of restricted how much I could turn over and I'm pretty sure I was the last one to fall asleep.

I could hear Jet and Gin down below us in the barn, and a long time after I thought he was asleep Edmond said in a quiet voice that the dogs always stayed up here during lambing because that's when they were needed most for rounding up the sheep and we were probably confusing them by being here now. And the soft sound of his voice made me want to move closer to him so I did, a little, and for a while we just looked at each other without blinking or saying a word. Then he moved his head to the right just enough so he could brush his cheek against the part of my arm that was near his face and after that he closed his eyes and fell asleep while I lay there and wondered if that's the feeling you're supposed to have when your cousin touches a totally innocent part of your anatomy that's even fully clothed.

I lay there for a while more, smelling the smell of tobacco in Edmond's hair and waiting to fall asleep, and I remembered thinking about a painting we had to copy in art class once called *The Calm Before the Storm*. It showed an old-fashioned sailing ship on a dead flat sea and the sky behind it was all sorts of gold and orange and red colors and it looked like the picture of peace if you hadn't noticed the greenish black section up in one corner, which was obviously *The Storm*. For some reason I used to think about that painting a lot, I guess because of that feeling you get when you know that something awful is going to happen and no one in the painting does and if you could only warn them then the rest of their lives might be different.

*The Calm Before the Storm* seemed like the right sort of phrase to jump into a person's mind on this occasion no matter how happy I was just at the moment because given how my life had gone so far, I'd had lots of practice in not expecting everything to turn out like your basic Hollywood tearjerker with the blind girl played by this year's Oscar Hopeful and the crippled boy miraculously walking and everyone going home happy.

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The next day, without actually saying that we were abandoning our plan to live in the barn we kind of gravitated back toward the house to have a bath and get clean clothes because if you want to know the truth about how romantic it is to sleep in a barn, it isn't very, due to the hay itching and the bats and how cold it gets at night even though it's supposed to be spring.

Back at the house Osbert was annoyed because he'd had to milk the goats himself and it was Piper's job, and it turned out that Aunt Penn had called from Oslo and told him she was doing everything in her power to get home and in the meantime there was some money in the bank account to tide us over, and she'd already spoken to the bank manager about us getting it. Osbert said she sounded more worried about the world than about us, but he didn't seem annoyed at being second best and Piper said It's because she knows we'll be fine.

For a second while Osbert was talking about Aunt Penn, Edmond's face looked very pale, but he was facing Isaac so I couldn't be absolutely sure and when he turned around again he looked fairly normal and said There are people all over the world who will help her if they can. And that was the end of the conversation.

The good old Royal Mail didn't seem to have any clue that there was a war starting up and that day there was a letter from my dad, and one from Leah. Dad yammered on a lot about Davina the D and how she was feeling what with the pregnancy and all, like it was preying on my mind that she might be feeling uncomfortable when in fact I just hoped her ankles would swell up like balloons and her breasts would sag down to her knees and the silicone in them turn to cement. There was a little something stuck on at the end of the letter about missing me, and how I should be careful not to become a Victim of the Terrorist Threat and had I managed to gain any weight blah blah blah.

Leah's letter was much more entertaining, with reports that Ms. Cool Herself, Melissa Banner, was going around telling everyone that she and Lyle Hershberg were Hooking Up. Well if this banner headline is true, I swear to god I will assign all my worldly goods to the Salvation Army and I'd say there's no danger of some religious tuba player ending up with my DVD player given that Lyle was famous for telling his last girlfriend Mimi Maloney that if she didn't Satisfy His Needs at least three times a day he'd have to find relief elsewhere and Melissa Banner is the world's most famous living professional virgin. Leah walked in once on Lyle Satisfying His Needs all by himself in homeroom when everyone should have been at school assembly and she said Well well well Lyle Hershberg, don't look now but there's a Smurf with a hard-on in your pants. Or at least she claims that's what she said but not to be disloyal or anything I've always had my doubts.

I wanted to talk all this through with Leah right then and there and I nearly cried with how much I missed having a cell phone that worked and e-mail even if I did have a hundred and twelve wacky cousins instead.

So I sat down and wrote back all about Edmond and Piper and Isaac and the animals and the house and the war, and I made it sound even better than it actually was, and by the time I finished the letter I'd convinced myself that This Was the Life oh yes and Boy Had I Lucked Out. But it's easier said than done to convince yourself that god has smiled on you when the actual fact is that you're living with strangers due to the evil workings of your wicked stepmother not to mention your official next of kin.

Then in came Osbert again with a face like a dead pigeon and said there were more attacks this time in the U.S.A.

And when, to seem interested, I said How terrible, where? He said Pittsburgh and Detroit and Houston only he pronounced it Hoos-ton. Well part of me was happy they hadn't bombed the Upper West Side and part of me started having this pretty good fantasy about Dad and Davina all bandaged up and limping and trying to come live here with us and us saying We are just SO SORRY but the airports are shut otherwise we'd simply LOVE to have you, really we would.

I tried eating a little bit of bacon today because Edmond particularly asked me to but it tasted like pig and I gagged.