

Part Two

1

I ended up in a hospital, where they kept me for months after I arrived back in New York, staring at a wall, stunned silent, frozen rigid with anger and grief. My willingness to eat confused and annoyed the staff, confounding their efforts to understand what I was doing there. For months, an explanation for my presence escaped them completely. But I wasn't about to help them with that problem.

Eventually they were forced to release me, still unable to diagnose the obvious.

So here it is, finally, and I hope they're paying attention.

I was in the hospital because it was convenient. It was the only way to get me out of England. I was not interested in starving, killing, slashing, depriving, maiming or punishing myself.

I was dying, of course, but then we all are. Every day, in perfect increments, I was dying of loss.

The only help for my condition, then as now, is that I refused to let go of what I loved. I wrote everything down, at first in choppy fragments; a sentence here, a few words there, it was the most I could stand at the time. Later I wrote more, my grief muffled but not eased by the passage of time.

When I go back over my writing now I can barely read it. The happiness is the worst. Some days I can't bring myself to remember. But I will not relinquish a single detail of the past. What remains of my life depends on what happened six years ago.

In my brain, in my limbs, in my dreams, it is still happening.

2

It took all this time for the war to end.

I was going to say For Good, but even now I don't want to press my luck.

The Occupation itself lasted only nine months; by Christmas that first year it was over. By then I was back in New York City, not because I wanted to be, but because I was half dragged and half deported and the final half was blackmail, and after all the rest of the things I managed to resist, I didn't have the strength left for that particular fight.

The worst part about those years wasn't the hospital, or the solitude, or the war, or even being away from Edmond.

It was the not knowing.

It's fashionable nowadays to talk about cramming a whole life into a few years, especially when people turn up dead at the end of it, which increasingly they do. But for me it's been the opposite. When I left England I entered limbo. For all that time I was waiting to come home.

You think I'm exaggerating, that I should qualify my statement: I waited yes, but I also

took a job, read books, spent days in air-raid shelters, filled out rationing papers, wrote letters, stayed alive.

But the truth is that nothing distracted me from waiting.

The. Time. Simply. Passed.

First, of course, I was reunited with my family. I met my half sister. Less than half, really. An eighth. A fiftieth.

They named her Leonora. Snub-nosed, Precious, and Refreshingly Normal, which is the line Davina's been using two or three hundred times a day for half a decade now.

I know exactly how the conversations with my father go.

“Thank heavens there are no problems with Leonora, why, *the money alone* that's been wasted on” (meaningful nod). And my father, looking uncomfortable, answers, “Of course, darling,” and silently taps his knuckles against their custom-made white Canadian birch headboard, for luck.

I was precious at her age too.

For my father's sake, I've pretended to be nice to Leonora. Not that she cares. She assumes admiration.

Well good for her. It's a lot easier that way.

I left the bosom of my family within a few days of being discharged from the hospital. Most of the schools had closed and it was hard to see the point of education in the midst of all that death and destruction anyway, so I moved into a derelict office building near what used to be Grand Central. No one wanted to live in that neighborhood anymore, but I liked it. The sky was bigger now and except for the occasional shooting, it was quiet.

Around the corner was The New York Public Library, Main Branch, Forty-second and Fifth. I assumed they were desperate for staff. Everyone in that neighborhood was. At the interview they asked me how I felt about the bomb threats and snipers and were impressed by what they took to be my courage. I was the only one who applied for the job, which may explain why they didn't seem to mind about my previous job experience. Hall monitor in a loony bin.

Day after day I attended my duties, which were virtually nonexistent. It was silent in there, cavernous and empty. Some days the only people who came in were our regulars: a small band of old-fashioned primary-source freaks and Intellectual Seekers. Everyone else stayed home and used the Internet, less worried about the quality of the information than about suicide bombers. Nearly everyone got used to living without little luxuries like library books.

It was only a few months ago that there was finally a pause in the thousands of wars being waged all over the planet. Or was it one big war? I forget.

I think everyone has.

A few days after the borders between the U.S. and England finally reopened for Casual Passage, the letter from Piper arrived. For the longest time I couldn't bring myself to read it.

For once my father's influence came in handy. He was trying to make amends, which I appreciated.

I was one of the first people they allowed to come back.

You'd laugh at the complications of my journey. From start to finish, the trip took almost a week. Of course it wasn't all traveling, there was a lot of waiting around too, but I was used to that.

When the plane finally did touch down, I half expected, half prayed that somehow a

miracle would happen and Edmond would appear at the airport, just like last time, with his cigarette and the sweet doggy tilt to his head. But how could he?

I was disappointed nonetheless.

The procedure of checking us through was complicated so I waited with the small anxious crowd, a few Americans but mostly Brits who got stuck on the wrong side of the Atlantic when borders all over the world started to close.

Our right to be in England had to be double and triple confirmed, with sheaves of paperwork and fingerprinted identification cards in addition to the new kind of passports we'd been issued.

All the officials at the airport carried guns. But underneath their grim expressions you could detect a hint of excitement. We were almost tourists, the first anyone had seen in years. For them, we represented the end of a long, hard winter. Like daffodils. They greeted us with barely disguised relief.

When I stepped outside, the familiar smell of that rainy April day hit me so hard I felt dizzy and had to put my bag down and wait for the spell to pass.

The airport was unrecognizable from my last visit, completely overgrown with gorse and ivy and huge prehistoric-looking thistles. Just as Isaac had predicted, the landscape was happily romping away from civilization. I half expected to see stags and wild boars on the runway.

Except for a couple of army jeeps the parking lot was empty. Their owners had hacked a space in the dense scrub that now covered everything, but the clearings looked temporary. It was like landing in a wild place; I'm glad I hadn't seen the condition of the runways beforehand.

The soldier had stamped my passport FAMILY in heavy black capital letters and I checked it now for reassurance and because I liked how fierce the word looked.

I'm coming, I said silently to everything I'd left behind, and headed for the single, ragged bus that would take me home.

3

While waiting for my connection out of London, I found a phone booth that worked and punched in the number Piper sent me. A man's voice I didn't recognize answered after a long time, and said no one else was there, so I left a message with my approximate time of arrival and before he hung up he paused and said They are so happy you've come.

There was no such thing as a direct route. Seven hours and two buses later I finished my final leg of the journey just outside a village that looked as if it had been deserted for a century.

The bus was early and there was no one around, but coming down the road toward me was a graceful young woman with a heavy curtain of dark hair and the most perfect pale skin I'd ever seen.

Her face lit up in a radiant smile when she saw me and then she was running and of course it was the smile that tipped me off that she was the same as ever, and then I heard the voice crying Daisy! which was exactly the same as it always had been and I tried to look at her face and connect her with the little girl I knew but my eyes were blinded by tears and I couldn't focus.

She didn't cry, you could tell from her expression she had made up her mind she

wouldn't. She just looked at me with her huge solemn eyes and looked and looked like she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Oh Daisy, she said.

Just that. And then again. Oh Daisy.

I couldn't even find a voice to answer so I embraced her instead.

Eventually she pulled away and leaned down to pick up my bag.

Everyone's desperate to see you, she said. And then, We still haven't any petrol for the jeep. Shall we walk?

Then I laughed, because what if I'd said no? And I picked up the other bag and she took my hand just as if we'd been together all along and she was still nine years old, and we walked home in the spring sunshine alongside the flowering overgrown hedgerows, past the apple trees in blossom and the fields gone to seed, up the hill. And everything she hadn't explained well enough in her letter she told me now, about Isaac and Aunt Penn and Osbert.

Neither of us mentioned Edmond.

Here are some of the things she told me.

She told me Aunt Penn's death had finally been confirmed two years after she first left for Oslo. I knew that. But I didn't know she'd been shot trying to reenter the country a few months after the war started, desperate to get back to her family.

Poor sisters, I thought. Both murdered by their children.

Our war and theirs turned out to be remarkably similar. There were snipers and small groups of rebels everywhere, disorganized bands of covert fighters and half the time you couldn't tell the Good Guys from the Bad Guys and neither could they. Buses blew up, and occasionally an office building or a post office or a school, and bombs were found in shopping malls and packages, and sometimes for no reason that anyone could explain there would be a cease-fire, and then someone somewhere would step on a land mine and we'd all be off again. You could ask a thousand people on seven continents what it was all about and you wouldn't get the same answer twice; nobody really knew for sure but you could bet one or more of the following words would crop up: oil, money, land, sanctions, democracy. The tabloids waxed nostalgic for the good old days of WWII, when the enemy all spoke a foreign language and the army went somewhere else to fight.

And yet life went on. Although the borders remained sealed to tourists, life started returning to something a little closer to normal after The Occupation ended, which was soon after I left.

By the time it became official that Aunt Penn wasn't coming home, Osbert was eighteen, and since no one else was interested in adopting what was left of the family, it fell to him, though as Piper said, nothing much changed. He moved out last year, she told me, to live with his girlfriend but we still see him all the time.

Isaac, apparently, was still Isaac. He spoke more now, but mostly to the animals. He'd spent the last five years building up the flock of tangly-haired sheep again, and he and Piper had goats, a small herd of cows, pigs, two riding horses, a pony, and chickens. The vegetable gardens were huge, with a section left untouched to provide seeds for next year.

They had decided to be self-sufficient; it seemed the safest thing to be now, and the natural way for them to live. In addition to the farm, Piper said people brought Isaac livestock with a variety of physical and mental problems because they knew he could fix them and it was a luxury these days to give up on a sick or dangerous animal. She said people in the country

called him the Witch Doctor, but in a nice way.

And then she told me about herself, how she was in love with Jonathan, and how he was training to be a doctor and she wanted to be one too. The universities had opened again but the waiting list to get in was long and Piper thought she might not qualify for entry this year. I could tell by what she said that it wasn't some temporary teen romance, but what else would you expect of Piper? She told me he loved her. Well of course he did. I told her I couldn't wait to meet him and it was true.

We walked the last few hundred yards uphill in silence and as we approached the drive I could see the honey-colored stone of the house. My hand tightened around Piper's and my heart stuttered, contracting so hard on each beat that the blood whooshed in my ears.

Isaac was there to greet us, holding a pretty border collie by the collar.

He smiled as I hugged him close and smelled his familiar smell and saw how he had grown taller than me, and quiet and slender and strong.

"I wanted to come collect you," he said gravely. "But Piper wouldn't let me. She's very possessive you know." And he smiled at us both.

I think it was the longest sentence I ever heard him speak. It was accompanied by the familiar tilt of the head and a slightly raised eyebrow and I felt the ground rush away from me, so strong was the memory, and the fear.

"Come on," Piper said, taking hold of my hand once more. "Let's go see Edmond."