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opening extract from

how i live now

written by

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One

My name is Elizabeth but no one's ever called me that. My father took one look at me when I was born and must have thought I had the face of someone dignified and sad like an old-fashioned queen or a dead person, but what I turned out like is plain, not much there to notice. Even my life so far has been plain. More Daisy than Elizabeth from the word go.

But the summer I went to England to stay with my cousins everything changed. Part of that was because of the war, which supposedly changed lots of things, but I can't remember much about life before the war anyway so it doesn't count in my book, which this is.

Mostly everything changed because of Edmond.

And so here's what happened.

Two

I'm coming off this plane, and I'll tell you why that is later, and landing at London airport and I'm looking around for a middle-aged kind of woman who I've seen in pictures who's my Aunt Penn. The photographs are out of date, but she looked like the type who would wear a big necklace and flat shoes, and maybe some kind of narrow dress in black or grey. But I'm just guessing since the pictures only ever showed her face.

Anyway, I'm looking and looking and everyone's leaving and there's no signal on my phone and I'm thinking Oh Great, I'm going to be abandoned at the airport so that's two countries they don't want me in, when I notice everyone's gone except this kid who comes up to me and says You must be Daisy. And when I look relieved he does too and says I'm Edmond.

Hello Edmond, I said, nice to meet you, and I look at him hard to try to get a feel for what my new life with my cousins might be like.

Now let me tell you what he looks like before I forget

because it's not exactly what you'd expect from your average fourteen-year-old what with the CIGARETTE and hair that looks like he cut it himself with a hatchet in the dead of night, but aside from that he's exactly like some kind of mutt, you know the ones you see at the dog shelter who are kind of hopeful and sweet and put their nose straight into your hand when they meet you with a certain kind of dignity and you know from that second that you're going to take him home? Well that's him.

Only he took me home.

I'll take your bag, he said, and even though he's about half a mile shorter than me and has arms about as thick as a dog leg, he grabs my bag, and I grab it back and say Where's your mom, is she in the car?

And he smiles and takes a drag on his cigarette, which even though I know smoking kills and all that, I think is a little bit cool, but maybe all the kids in England smoke cigarettes? I don't say anything in case it's a well-known fact that the smoking age in England is something like twelve and by making a big thing about it I'll end up looking like an idiot when I've barely been here five minutes. Anyway, he says Mum couldn't come to the airport 'cause she's working and it's not worth anyone's life to interrupt her while she's working, and everyone else seemed to be somewhere else, so I drove here myself.

I looked at him funny then.

You drove here yourself? You DROVE HERE yourself? Yeah well and I'm the Duchess of Panama's Private Secretary.

And then he gave a little shrug and a little dog-shelter-dog kind of tilt of his head and he pointed at a falling-apart black jeep and he opened the door by reaching in through the window which was open, and pulling the handle up and yanking. He threw my bag in the back, though more like pushed it in, because it was pretty heavy, and then said Get in Cousin Daisy, and there was nothing else I could think of to do so I got in.

I'm still trying to get my head around all this when instead of following the signs that say Exit he turns the car up on to this grass and then drives across to a sign that says Do Not Enter and of course he Enters and then he jogs left across a ditch and suddenly we're out on the highway.

Can you believe they charge thirteen pounds fifty just to park there for an hour? he says to me.

Well to be fair, there is no way I'm believing any of this, being driven along on the wrong side of the road by this skinny kid dragging on a cigarette and let's face it who wouldn't be thinking what a weird place England is.

And then he looked at me again in his funny doggy way, and he said You'll get used to it. Which was strange too, because I hadn't said anything out loud.

Three

I fell asleep in the jeep because it was a long way to get to their house and watching the highway go by always makes me want to close my eyes. And then when I opened them again, there was this welcoming committee staring at me through the window and in it were four kids, and a goat and a couple of dogs who I later got told were called Jet and Gin, and in the background I saw some cats scooting around after a bunch of ducks that for some reason or other were hanging around on the lawn.

And for a minute I was so glad I was fifteen and from New York City because even though I haven't actually Seen It All, I have in fact seen more than plenty, and I have one of the best Oh Yeah, This Is So Much What I Usually Do kind of faces of anyone in my crowd. I put on that face right then, though let's be fair, all of this was taking me pretty much by surprise, because I didn't want them to think that kids from New York City are not at least as cool as English kids who just happen to

live in huge ancient houses and have goats and dogs and all the rest.

There's still no Aunt Penn but Edmond introduces me to the rest of my cousins, who are called Isaac and Osbert and Piper, which I won't even begin to comment on. Isaac is Edmond's twin, and they look exactly the same, only Isaac's eyes are green and Edmond's are the same colour as the sky, which at the moment is grey. At first I liked Piper best because she just looked straight at me and said We are very glad you've come Elizabeth.

Daisy, I corrected her, and she nodded in a solemn kind of way that made me feel sure she'd remember.

Isaac started lugging my bag over to the house and then Osbert who's the oldest came and grabbed it away from him looking superior, and disappeared into the house with it.

Before I tell you what happened then, I have to tell you about the house, which is practically indescribable if the only sort of houses you've lived in before are apartments in New York City.

First let's get it clear that the house is practically falling down, but for some reason that doesn't seem to make any difference to how beautiful it is. It's made out of big chunks of yellowish stone, and has a steep roof, and is shaped like an L around a big courtyard with fat pebbles set in the ground. The short part of the L has a wide arched doorway and it used to be the stable, but now it's the kitchen and it's huge, with

zigzag brick floors and big windows all across the front and a stable door that's left open Whenever it's not actually snowing, says Edmond.

Climbing up the front of the house is a huge vine with a stem so thick it must have been growing there for hundreds of years but there aren't any flowers on it yet, I guess because it's too early. Behind the house and up some stone steps is a square garden surrounded by high brick walls and in there are tons of flowers blooming already all in shades of white. In one corner there's a stone angel about the size of a child, very worn, with folded wings and Piper told me it was a child who lived in the house hundreds of years ago and is buried in the garden.

Later when I get a chance to look around the house I find out the inside is much more jumbled up than the outside with funny corridors that don't seem to lead anywhere and tiny bedrooms with slanty ceilings hidden away at the top of stairs. The stairs all creak and there are no curtains on any of the windows and all the main rooms seem huge after what I'm used to and they're scattered with big old comfortable furniture and paintings and books and huge fireplaces you can walk into and animals posing around the place to make it look even more authentic oldy-worldy.

The bathrooms turn out to be pretty oldy-worldy too or maybe I should say antique and make a huge noise whenever you want to do anything private.

Behind the house is tons of farmland some of which looks just like meadows and some of which is planted with potatoes and some is just starting to bloom in an acidy yellow colour which Edmond says is rape as in rapeseed oil but the only kind of rape I know is the kind you read about in the paper ten times a day and always ignore unless the rapist turns out to be a priest or someone on TV.

There's a farmer who comes and does all the planting because Aunt Penn always has Important Work To Do Related To The Peace Process and anyway wouldn't know the first thing about farming according to Edmond. But they keep sheep and goats and cats and dogs and chickens For Decoration said Osbert in a slightly sneery way and I'm getting the feeling about him that he's the one cousin who reminds me of people I knew in New York City.

Edmond and Piper and Isaac and Osbert, and Jet and Gin the black-and-white dogs, and a bunch of cats all went into the kitchen first and sat down at or under a wooden table and someone made cups of tea and then they all stared at me like I was something interesting they'd ordered from a zoo and asked me lots of questions in a much more polite way than would ever happen in New York, where kids would pretty much wait for some grown-up to come in all fake-cheerful and put cookies on a plate and make you say your names.

After a while I was feeling woozy and thought Boy, could I ever use a drink of freezing water to clear my head, and when I looked up Edmond was standing there holding one hand out and in it was a glass of water with ice cubes, and all the time looking at me with his almost-smiling look and though I didn't think much about this at the time, I noticed Isaac looking at Edmond in a funny way.

Then Osbert got up and left, he's sixteen and the oldest in case I didn't say it, which is a year older than me. Piper asked if I wanted to see the animals, or just lie down for a while, and I said lie down because even before I left New York I hadn't exactly been getting my fair share of sleep. She looked disappointed, but only for a second, and really I was feeling so much more tired than polite that I hardly cared.

She took me upstairs to a room down at the end of a hall which was the kind of room a monk would live in – smallish and plainish with thick white walls that weren't straight like new walls, and one huge window divided into lots of panes of yellowish and greenish glass. There was a big striped cat under the bed and some daffodils in an old bottle and suddenly that room seemed like the safest place I'd ever been in my life, which just goes to show how wrong a person can be about what's in store for them but here I go jumping the gun again.

We pushed my suitcase into a corner, and Piper came

in with a big pile of old blankets and she said in a shy way that they were woven from the sheep on the farm a long time ago and that the black ones were from the black sheep.

I pulled the black sheep blanket over my head and closed my eyes and for no good reason I could think of, I felt like I'd belonged to this house for centuries but that could have been wishful thinking.

And then I fell asleep.