

DAY OF NOW



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*For Benni*



**PART 1**  
**THE BLUE HOUSE**



# 1

The first sign of life in the outside world – of other people who are still, at this very moment, living – comes from the radio.

The radio is Dayna's. She found it on one of the family supply runs and took a liking to it. It's a rectangular box, only a little larger than the palm of her hand. It is a shiny silver colour, with some knobs you can swivel this way and that, and other knobs you can push up and down. It has very small holes on one side, where the noise comes out. The noise used to be sound in the past, Dayna knows. People talking about the weather and events happening and, most exciting of all, music. But now it's just noise because all the people who used to do these things are dead. White noise, Father calls it. White noise is both thrilling and a little scary. It is scary because it sounds like an angry monster just before it attacks. It is thrilling because it is connected to the past.

Father didn't want Dayna to take the radio because it is against the supply run rules: only take what is necessary – tinned food, batteries, medical supplies, sometimes clothes or toothpaste or razors or books. Occasionally, Father bends the rules and they go into what used to be department stores, where the dusty shelves are filled with useless, lovely,

interesting things, like dead electrical gadgets or puzzle games or small plastic figures, and there Dayna and her brother, Pax, are allowed to choose one thing, as long as it's not too big for their rucksacks. And as long as it doesn't need batteries.

The radio needs batteries and so Father said no. 'There's no use in it anyway,' he said. 'There aren't any radio stations left.'

But Dayna disobeyed him and slipped it into her rucksack when he wasn't looking. She usually never disobeys him, not on the outside at least, where they have to move as a unit and rely on each other and be quick to react. She can't fully explain why she wanted the radio so badly. She doesn't truly believe it will ever be anything but white noise, the ghosts of the dead radio stations and the dead announcers and the dead music. But this in itself is a wonder.

Father soon found out about the radio, but it didn't much matter. He let her keep it, though she has to work for the batteries: skin rabbits or gut fish, which are jobs that she hates. Pax helps her, and once the radio is alive, the two of them will spend the hottest part of the day listening to the white ghost noises, and sometimes they will flinch at a particular hiss, and then they will nudge each other and grin.

And then, one day, the white noise turns into sound. Pax, who is playing with the radio at the time, squeals in shock and drops it. Even so, the woman's voice, a radio voice that sounds nothing like a real voice, continues from the ground.

—*there, come and be welcome, she says. Follow the hummingbird. 51 degrees, 35 minutes, 53.88 seconds north, 0 degrees, 7 minutes, 10.92 seconds west. Repeat: If anyone is out there, come and be welcome. Follow the hummingbird.*

Dayna and Pax stare at each other with wide, wide eyes. This radio woman is the first person they have ever heard, aside from each other and Father and, a long time ago, Uncle William and Mother. It's not as if they believed they were the only humans left in the entire world. Father has said there must be others somewhere, getting by much in the same fashion as they are getting by here. He has also said that they have to hide straight away as soon as they see a stranger. But before this moment, this was always just something you were told but would never experience for yourself.

'Father!' they cry, almost simultaneously. 'Father! Father!'

Father comes rushing into the room, his eyes squinting and sleep-sanded.

'What? What—' But he stops then because the woman in the radio is still repeat-repeat-repeating her message, and he hears it.

'Oh,' he says. He listens until the message has repeated itself for the fifth time, then he says: 'Don't get too excited.' He reaches down and turns the woman off. 'It's probably an old message, in an endless loop. From long ago.'

'But what if it's not?' asks Dayna. 'What if there's a village out there, and they want to bring people together so that the village gets bigger and stronger?'

She knows that villages are people living together in small groups of houses. There are abandoned villages and towns everywhere, but they don't count because they are only buildings and no people.

'What do the numbers and minutes mean, Father?' asks Pax eagerly. 'Is it code?'

Father shakes his head. 'Just let it rest.'

They argue about it, Dayna and Father. Dayna wants to

follow the hummingbird (whatever that is) and find the other people, but Father is angry and says: 'No, No, NO.' He is scared of other people because things like the police and judges and prisons only exist in stories now, they aren't real any more. Which means people can be bad and no one can stop them. 'Look at what happened to your mother,' he says.

Dayna and Pax know their mother died when Dayna was little and Pax was littler still, but Father has never told them how.

'You mean bad people killed her?' asks Pax in a very quiet voice.

They know and love Mother through Father's stories, but they don't remember her.

'Yes,' says Father, and doesn't say any more. And this is how he wins the argument.

Dayna and Pax still listen to the radio, but Pax only wants to listen to the noise, like before. Dayna memorises the exact frequency, and when she's alone, she will tune into the woman and her message, and wonder about the hummingbird people.

Dayna was born into the dead world, and Pax was born just before it ended. Exactly how long ago that was can only be guessed. At the beginning, Father tried to keep track with home-made calendars, but forgot more often than not and has long since given up. You can no longer tell just by the weather. Father says there used to be four seasons always in motion: cold, warmer, hot, colder. And then repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Now most of the year is made up of hot days, with a lot of rain and thunderstorms, especially at night. Trees still renew their leaves, but at different times and not all at once, so that you hardly notice. And

if winter does come (often it won't), all the difference it brings is slightly cooler air.

Father and Dayna and Pax live in a house they call the Blue House because it has a door the colour of a cloudless midday sky, the only blue like that on the street. The house's other colour is like most things, green, although you can still see traces of the red bricks between the many leaves and vines creeping over the facade. Father chose the street because there's a stream close by, but still far enough away in case of floods, and a wide field with intertwining trees that was a nature area (park, Father calls it) even back when most things weren't. You can catch fish in the stream and small animals in the undergrowth, and you can boil the stream water and drink it. The town supermarkets and kiosks and pharmacies are all gaping empty (contrary to the shops with useless items), but many dead houses still have a good supply of essentials, or used to. There are surrounding towns too, which they have to visit more and more often now to keep up their supplies; a day trip there and back on foot. Father chose the Blue House out of all the other houses on the street because blue was Mother's favourite colour. Mother was already dead when they arrived at the Blue House. Uncle William was still with them. Dayna was so young she can't remember, and Pax was just a baby. That was about a month after the end of the old world. But Father won't talk about that.

He will talk about other things, though. Father is the most fantastic storyteller. The stories are all from the time before, and they fascinate Dayna and Pax, just as the radio fascinates them. The lost world is a marvellous place, if only for all the things that have happened there.

One of Pax's favourite stories is that of King Kong, a

gorilla as tall as a house, who fell in love with a human woman and was killed because of it. Pax doesn't care about the love bit, but he's very interested in the flying machines called aeroplanes that were able to take the gorilla down. He has built miniature aeroplanes out of bits of wood and glue and plays with them a lot. Dayna likes listening to the adventures of her namesake best. She's a heroine of olden times, who didn't want to believe in monsters but fought them anyway.

Dayna is not like her namesake: she does believe; it would be foolish not to, now.

In addition to storytelling before bedtime and supply runs once in a while, the family has other routines. In fact, every day is a routine with only a few changes: indoor lessons and outdoor lessons, hunting and food planting, Father's heat headaches, the radio, games, meals, sleep. Even dangerous things like mist days or the crazed have become part of the routine. Dayna dreams up adventures in her head for her and Pax's entertainment, and will secretly wish that something exciting and new and wonderful might happen in real life; something connected to the hummingbird people. But of course, it never does.

And so, the days go by, and nothing changes. And all that really shows the passing of time are the rising indents on the inside of the wooden doorframe that mark Dayna growing, and Pax trying to catch up.

The endless routine ends with a scream.

# 2

Dayna and Pax are just returning from a swim in the stream when they hear it, and stop dead in their tracks.

And then run.

Father is curled up on the tiled kitchen floor of the Blue House. He's not dead, he's breathing.

'Father! Father!'

Then Dayna sees something next to him, a small furry heap on the ground. A dead rat. Next to it is Father's cricket bat, with the red mark clearly visible where it made contact.

How did it get in? Did someone leave the door open? Did it burrow into the cellar?

Father stirs and grunts and his eyelids flutter, then blink, then stay open. He pushes himself up and looks at them. 'It's all right,' he pants, although they can see it's not. He's cradling his left arm in his right, and it's swelling already. The bite marks are startlingly red.

'Did it have the craze?' asks Dayna, but of course it did. Why else would a rat attack a human man?

Father nods. 'Must have. Check the eyes.'

Dayna doesn't want to, but she forces herself to bend over the crushed rat. Its glassy eyes are pink. Some rats have naturally pink eyes, so that, as Dayna's namesake would say, is not conclusive evidence at all. But Father's swelling bite

mark, and the fact that he's beginning to tremble and sweat simultaneously, all point towards something she doesn't want to be true.

'My eyes, Day,' gasps Father.

This time Pax is quicker, and he peers into Father's eyes with their noses almost touching. Then he pulls back and whimpers. Dayna looks too and sees the whites are bloodshot with red veins.

'You're not going to die, are you?' asks Pax. 'I didn't die when I was little and the crazed cat bit me. Remember, you said? You told me.'

Dayna remembers, vaguely. But that was when they still had a vaccine. In all the time they've lived in the Blue House and gone on supply runs, they haven't found any more vaccine. Father says it's because ordinary pharmacies didn't stock it, as there was hardly any time to work out a good system before things started to escalate very, very quickly. Mother was a doctor in the old world and managed to get hold of a handful of vials. That's why Pax didn't die that day he was bitten. Mother saved him, even though by then, she was already dead herself. But that was a long time ago, and the rest of the vials are no longer liquid at all; they have become hard and crumbly. No one can inject the once-upon-a-time vaccine into a syringe any more, and no one can get better from it.

Father's bloodshot eyes meet Dayna's, and now he's speaking only to her: 'You and Pax have to pack clothes and food and leave. Find some safe place, not too far away, but not too close either. And wait.'

Pax whimpers again but doesn't protest. Neither does Dayna. There are one of three ways things could go now, and all of them know it. Either the sickness will pass after

a few days, leaving Father trembly and weak but alive. Or it won't pass, and he'll be dead by that time. Or, and this is what Father is afraid of, he will get the craze himself.

Zombies, he sometimes jokingly calls the crazed. They already existed in the old world, but only as legends and scary stories. Visions of the future, Dayna supposes, because the people of the dead world were magic and could do such things.

They pack their rucksacks quickly, mostly with gear and essentials, although Pax also squeezes an aeroplane in, and Dayna a book and her radio.

Leave ... now,' Father tells them when they bring him plastic bottles of clean water and a pot of yesterday's boiled potatoes. He's wheezing heavily.

Silent tears are streaming down Pax's cheeks. Dayna mustn't cry because Father has to know that she is strong. Father won't let them hug or touch him, but he says: 'I love you ... very much.'

Says: 'It will be ... all right. Whatever ... happens.'

Says: 'Go.'

They choose one of the tall houses at the other end of the dead town and climb its stairs to the topmost flat. Closed doors are seldom a problem because Dayna inherited a lock pick from Uncle William, and spent many patient hours teaching herself how to use it. The people who lived in this flat were a family. There's a room with faded star wallpaper and old toys still strewn over the floor: small cars, coloured bricks, little square figures with yellow faces. Another room has a leaking beanbag and black-and-white comic books you read back to front, and so many photos. The girl on most of these photos looks so different from Dayna; like all

dead-world girls, with their long hair and new clothes and colourful eyelids. Dayna's hair is short enough to stick up at the sides if she runs her fingers through it, and her worn T-shirt and jeans are at least as old as the Echidna fungus, whose arrival changed everything. The photo girl is laughing; she is happy. She doesn't know what is coming in her Now. She doesn't care what is happening in Dayna's.

From the window of this room, you can see rusted cars and gnarled trees and plants creeping up and into buildings. You can see a clump of Echidna spreading over a brick wall, its purple-pink colour and thin, long stems unmistakable even from this distance; its pulsing caps a ticking time bomb. You can't see the Blue House.

'How long until we can go back?' asks Pax.

'Two days,' says Dayna. 'Father's rule.'

Sometimes the infected become crazed quickly, and sometimes they will take their time about it. Humans hold out longer than animals, Father says, but once humans turn, that's it for them, they won't survive. If Father hasn't turned in two days, then it should be all right. 'It *will* be all right,' says Dayna (because it has to be), and Pax looks at her and accepts what she says (because it HAS to be), and agrees: 'Yes.'

He wanders off, probably to the room with the toys. Pax doesn't suit his name at all, because it means peace in a dead language, and he always has to be moving and doing things. Dust explodes from the girl's bed when Dayna sits down, and it makes her sneeze and sneeze until she opens a window, then calls to Pax to open the others. She takes Mother's palm-sized picture out of her rucksack and studies it. Mother's picture is from before, like every picture is. It's both sleek from what it is and gritty from

being touched so often. Along the folding lines, the image has rubbed off completely so it looks like Mother is divided into four pieces which meet just below her neck. Still, she's smiling and happy and so very, very pretty, and her long dark brown hair is the exact same colour as Dayna and Pax's. And when Dayna squints, she can magic the lines away. And when she pretends, she can hear Mother – whose voice is gentle and kind and light because women's voices don't deepen like men's – tell her that it's true: everything will be all right.