DAY OF NOW

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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.