



Today the mud is dry and crusted and blowing in my eyes. Today is also my birthday. I think today is my birthday. I asked one of the grown-ups what is today's date.

'Is it July third?' I asked.

'Something like that,' they said.

July third is the date of my birthday. I think it is the date of my birthday.

I'm *sure* it is. I'll be ten. I *am* ten. I am certain.

There have been so many things I've had to remember, and time is so difficult to measure properly.

But I would not forget my birthday. I cannot remember my mum's birthday, or my dad's – but I remember their names, their full names.

I remember my sisters' names, and I'm pretty sure I remember their birthdays too. I remember my sisters. And our home. Our own home.

I remember the money my uncle shoved into my pocket, before he lifted me onto the boat filled with strangers. When I went to sleep, the money was in my pocket, and when I woke, the money was gone.

And my sisters are gone, and my mother



and father are gone. But I don't want to think about that.

Or when the man threatened me with a knife and stole my pack. My pack, with my phone . . . my phone, and my papers.

My phone, full of photos of my sisters and mum and dad, and my friends, their numbers – videos, playlists, all the fun things from my life.



And the papers – papers which would let everybody know for certain that today is my birthday, and mum and dad's full names, the name of our village, and everything about me, my story, all the stuff that I am beginning to forget.



Which is why nobody here knows it is my birthday. So nobody here gives me any presents.

If anybody gave me a birthday card, I would show it to the Guards, and say, *Hey, look! Do you believe me now? My name! My age! Here on my birthday card! Proof!*

This is why I want to tell you my story, because the Guards say that everything that happens must be *documented*.

But I'm not going to tell the story of my past. I'm going to tell the story of my life right now, here in the Camp, beginning today.

On my tenth birthday.

My story goes like this . . .



I

My friends, L and E, are crouching down in the mud, picking breadcrumbs. L is rolling the pieces into small balls, adding crumbs as she shuffles along, adding and rolling, then carefully placing the bread patties into a plastic bag hooked round her wrist.

E has a carrier bag around his wrist as well, but he sneaks most of the crumbs into his mouth as he picks them, and the balls he is rolling don't really hold together. He is making a mess.





E is wearing trousers that have been donated and are too big for him, rolled up at the cuffs so they don't drag in the mud, and baggy round the waist. They make him look even smaller than he is, and he is pretty tiny to begin with. His sister L has grown too big for her own clothes, and the sleeves on her jumper only reach halfway to her wrists. L and E look silly, crouched in the mud, too big and too small.



At first I think they are picking brown breadcrumbs, but when I get closer I see the bread has been soaking up the mud water, like gravy.

'Who wants to play?' I say.

E springs to his feet. 'Meee!'

'We're eating,' says L. 'Look,' she says. 'Look at all this food.'

‘For real?’ I say.

‘When the aid truck came,’ L says, ‘everybody made a mad rush and grabbed all the bread. It was gone before me and E could get anywhere near. But look,’ – she spreads her hands across the mud in front of her – ‘they wasted all of this. Dropped a zillion crumbs and just left them. It’s treasure.’

‘What shall we play?’ E asks me, popping crumbs into his mouth as he speaks.

‘Don’t eat them all now.’ L tsks at her little brother. ‘You’ll have none left for later.’

‘I know where there’s apples,’ I say.

Her head jerks up. ‘What?’

‘Apples!’ I say. *Juicy* apples. But only for secret agents.’

‘Not kids then,’ says L, looking back down.

She is grumpy today.

'I'm only messing,' I say. 'But there *are* apples.'

'I'm a secret agent,' says E. 'Can I have an apple?'

'I'm *head* secret agent,' I say.

'I'm head secret agent,' says E.

'You can't both be the head secret agent,' says L. 'Anyway, if anyone's a secret agent, I'm a secret agent.'

'That's stupid,' says E. 'You can't be a secret agent because secret agents are men.'

'And you two are little boys,' says L. 'I'm the oldest, so if anybody is a secret agent then it's me. And anyway, I'm the leader.'

You're still a little child though, I think. You're not that much older than me. And I'm only ten.

‘But you don’t know where the apples are,’

I say.

‘Show me,’ she says, ‘and I’ll keep us safe.’

L will keep us safe?

E picks up a twig. ‘I’ve got a gun,’ he says.

‘It’s a rifle.’

I pick up E’s carrier bag and hook the handles over my ears, so the bag hangs behind my neck. ‘And I’ve got a cloak of invisibility. Come on, let’s go.’

So off we go, to search for the apples, L, E and I.

‘Secret agents don’t have a cloak of invisibility,’ says L. ‘You’re thinking of wizards.’

‘This wizard just joined the secret service,’

I say. ‘Are you a witch?’

She doesn't answer. She grabs E by the collar and at the same time gives me a shove so hard I fall into a bush, and I scratch my arm.

'What was that for?' I ask her.

'Shush.'

I peek through the leaves of the bush and I see a Guard. He has a real rifle, and has stopped on the path ahead of us. L is holding E down close to the ground and has her finger to his lips so he won't make any noise.

We are on the edge of the administration zone. Only Guards are allowed in this area.

E holds up his twig. 'Shall I shoot him?' he whispers.

I wonder if the Guard would shoot *us*. I have never heard of a Guard shooting any of



the children. But they have clubs. Once, when everybody gathered to ask for blankets when the snow came, a Guard struck me on the arm and my bruise changed colour every day for a week. It was like a slow motion rainbow.

The Guard's club is a hundred times thicker than E's twig.



'Why didn't you tell us the apples were in the administration zone?' L hisses.



'Did you think they'd just be hanging on a tree?' I ask.

She doesn't answer that.

The Guard passes by and doesn't see us hiding behind the bush. I still have E's carrier bag hooked on my ears. 'The invisibility cloak worked!' I give L and E the thumbs up.

‘Which way from here?’ says L.

‘The smoking patch.’

The smoking patch is outside the admin block, where the Guards go to smoke their cigarettes. Hardly anybody in the Camp smokes, not even the grown-ups. Everybody needs food, and warmth. Smoking is of no use. But the Guards must have plenty of food, because they never look hungry, or skinny, and they waste their time putting cigarettes in their mouths and puffing smoke.

And they waste food. If they can afford to waste food, then they must be getting plenty of it. Which makes me wonder why they keep it all to themselves. Which makes me wonder why they won't let any of us out of the Camp to try and

find food of our own. I wonder about that a lot.

‘Shall we tunnel?’ says E.

‘No,’ says L. ‘But we’ll crawl. We’ll crawl through the long grass. On our bellies. Like secret agents on a surprise attack, remember?’

‘Spies,’ says E. ‘Do or die.’

The grass tickles my nose.

We crawl all the way to the smoking patch without being seen. It’s easier not being seen when you’re a kid.

‘I’m a cat,’ I say, ‘sneaking up on a bird.’

‘I’m a tiger,’ says E, ‘hunting a monkey.’

‘Shush!’ says L. There is a Guard standing ahead, puffing on his cigarette. L is worried about us getting caught.

But I'm not worried. If children in the Camp get caught breaking any of the rules, then their families get sanctions. Sanctions is another word for punishment, where you get sent to the back of the queue. The reason I'm not worried about my family getting punished is because I lost my family. Or my family lost me. L and E don't have any family either because they all got blown up.

And we're not even *in* the queue are we, so how could we be sent to the back of it? If they put us at the back of the queue, it would be brilliant, like a *reward*.

So when I see the Guard, I stay *shush* like L says, but only because I remember the rainbow bruise on my arm.

He is standing by a litter bin but he throws

the cigarette stub on the ground. There are loads of stubs scattered on the ground.

‘I don’t see any apples,’ says L.

‘Wait,’ I say.

The Guard looks around. I wonder if he has heard us. But then I realise he’s not really looking around. His job is to smoke cigarettes and look around. Now that he has smoked his cigarette he is doing the looking around bit.

Job done, I imagine him saying to himself. He turns around and walks back towards the building.

‘Bang!’ says E, shooting the Guard in the back with his twig.

‘Shush!’ says L. But the Guard is already making his way through the door.

‘You missed,’ I say to E, who’s blowing the rifle smoke from the end of his twig.

I stand up.

‘What are you doing?’ L hisses.

‘Watch.’ I walk right up to the bin. I hear E gasp behind me. E likes to play at being brave, but he’s only little, and he never sees L being brave because it is L’s job to be careful. Her job is to look after her little brother. If she gets into trouble because of playing at being brave, and she gets separated from him, E won’t have anybody left. He’ll be all on his own.

And little kids like E, when they are left all on their own, they disappear. They get taken.

It is why we must all stick together. To watch out for each other.



I am standing on the concrete next to the bin. I wave at L and E. She ducks further down behind the bush, and pulls E down with her. It's like hide-and-seek.



I shove my arm down into the bin, and I feel around. My fingers brush against something sticky, which I think is an old wrapper. Then they brush against something soft and warm, which I think is an old rag one of the Guards used for cleaning mud from his boots. Then they brush against the little twig that sticks up out of the top of an apple. The stalk. I tweezer it between my finger and thumb, and pull it out. There are two more in here too – I saw the Guards drop them in earlier, when I was spying.

I pick all three apples out of the bin and

hurry with them back to the bush. L and E hold out their hands eagerly.

L frowns. ‘There’s not much to them, is there?’ she says.

But E says, ‘This is amazing!’ He starts crunching into his apple straight away.

They are both right. I gave the biggest apple core to E because he is the littlest, and I gave L the smallest apple core, because she is the biggest. I kept the middle-sized one for myself. It is pretty chunky. L is right about how much people waste. The Guards won’t eat the core of the apple because it has pips and isn’t so juicy – but here I am munching away at half an apple. I don’t even bother spitting the pips, because pips are good for you too. It may not be the juiciest

part of the apple, but it is still pretty lush.

‘This is a feast!’ says E. He is grinning and chewing both at the same time.

‘Don’t talk with your mouth full,’ L tells him. But she is smiling too, and I know I’ve done well. This is a million times better than muddy old breadcrumbs.

Happy Birthday, I think.