

I found the first finger in the middle of a snow-covered path.

Commented [CS1]: Wow, love this as a first line. (dark for MG? Maybe not? I don't know!)

Actually, that's not true. Tuppence discovered it before I did. I might not have noticed it if he hadn't stopped to sniff it, hovering his broad black nose overtop of something nestled in the freshly fallen snow.

Commented [CS2]: I like this introduction of the dog without saying it outright 😊

"What is it, Tup?"

He sat down in front of what looked like a short stick. Dancing on his two front feet in agitation, he let loose an expectant whine.

I gazed at the object at his feet. Stark and stiff and bent black in the snow was a dismembered human finger. Black and charred as though it had been burned. I'd seen burnt bodies after the bombing, but only out of the corner of my eye. Peripherally.

Commented [CS3]: Eep!

Commented [CS4]: interesting

My stomach lurched as I stooped down for a closer look, bile pinching my cheeks. I let out a long slow breath when I discovered it was merely a misshapen stick. One that looked uncannily like an index finger.

Tuppence wouldn't touch it, which was odd because he lived to chew sticks, it was this dog's number one pastime. He flinched away from it but couldn't quite leave it alone, barking and bowing down and prancing about until I extracted the stick-finger from the snow.

I removed my mitt and ran my fingers over its rounded knuckle-joint, the wrinkles etched around it, furrowed in black, peeling bark. A course, chipped fingernail. Crooked, the finger pointed at something unknown. An indication. A warning.

The stick-finger was bone-chilling to the touch. The cold buzzed through me like an electric shock. It echoed in my head, a hum overtop of the ringing that was already there. A high-pitched hissing that came with bombs and the artillery fire. And stayed after the planes had gone. Grandad told me it was a condition called tinnitus.

But this sound was different. A distant thrum that intensified in pitch and volume until it had beaten out the shape of its sound. A hollow knocking like the *tap-tapping* of a woodpecker. Harder and louder until the banging drowned out every other sound. I fell to my knees in the snow, a sharp, blinding pain behind my eyes with every beat.

Tuppence could sense the rhythmic knocking, too. He whined and dipped his head low, back arched and hackles raised, tail tucked firmly between his legs. He sniffed at my neck and licked my cheeks, offering me his own special form of canine comfort.

And then as quickly as it sharpened, the pounding softened into a dull primal hum, almost undetectable in the ringing silence. The jolting ache in my head subsided.

I climbed to my feet with a shiver and shook out the snow that had crept up my sleeves, dusted it off my knees. I frowned at the stick-finger, but I didn't toss it away. I slipped it into my pocket, my breath misting in front of me on the cold winter morning.

With a low growl, Tuppence fell into step beside me as we walked home.

We were so connected, Tuppence and I, and I trusted him more than anyone in the world. Tup showed up at my grandfather's front door as a stray, caked in a year's worth of mud and leaves. Shaggy as a sheepdog but smart as a whip. He knew exactly what he was doing when he picked our front step to occupy. When he chose me. That was two years ago, when I'd first come to live in Somerset with my grandad. I was nine years old when I opened the door to Tuppence's hopeful fuzzy grey-and-white face.

At the time, my grandad grumbled, "I couldn't care a tuppence for that mangy dog, do what you want with it." So I bathed and fed him and called him "Tuppence." I thought he'd more than earned that name.

Commented [CS5]: POV? Not sure it's an issue...we were close third before but it's a little pulled back here.

Commented [CS6]: MG?

Commented [CS7]: Nice grounding detail/use of senses.

Commented [CS8]: Love this idea

With the stick-finger tucked safely away, I skirted the farmer's fields and wove through the thicket that backed onto the overgrown garden of Cheddarmarsh, the tumbledown old country estate where I lived with my grandfather. The thrum in my head now faded, its presence barely discernable underneath the usual hum. But it was there.

Pushing open the wide back door, I stole up the spiral back staircase from the kitchen to my bedroom on the third floor. I had the entire floor to myself, an apartment that used to be the servants' quarters, with a small kitchen—though the appliances were far too old and dangerous to use—and a laundry chute that plummeted four floors to the laundry room in the basement.

Commented [CS9]: Creepy!

I slid an old metal lockbox from under my bed and placed the stick-finger carefully on the forest-green velvet lining. Beside my mother's engagement ring, my father's bowtie, and my little brother's soother. I pulled a wrinkled, yellowing picture out, running my fingers delicately across everyone's face. My mother's starlet hairstyle and smile, my father's confident but playful grin, and my brother's dancing eyes and dimples. I hadn't seen them for two years. Mum was at her aunt's in the north, in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne with my five-year-old brother, Charlie. And Dad was flying spitfires back and forth in raids across the Channel.

Commented [CS10]: Nice hints here

Commented [CS11]: Huh. I'd gotten the idea the war was over rather than ongoing.

"Ilana" Grandad's tinny voice called up the chute. Since it had doors on every floor, the chute was our fast and easy form of communication. I felt like a resistance spy whenever we used it. I closed the lockbox, slid it under my bed, and forgot about it.

When I found the second finger, things began to get weird.

Or, I should say, when it found me.

I was walking home from school and someone grabbed the hood of my coat. Only it wasn't a person, it was a tree branch blowing about on a crisp March afternoon that had caught

hold of me. I pulled away and something came loose from the tree. A gnarled middle finger lay in the folds of my hood.

I fished it out and suddenly, the outline of everything became sharper. The rusted red brick-lines of the school; the newly formed buds popping up on the trees; the detail on the hedgerow that crowded out the narrow roadway. I caught the trace of a bunny scurrying into the blooming underbrush. Heard a slight splash and saw the furred back of a water rat skimming away into the reeds of a narrow stream. The trees whispered to me as I passed by on my hike home. A rush of wind stirred my soul and I tamped down the urge to run with it. Swallowed the howl that rose in my throat.

All of my senses were heightened. I smelled the loam of the wood, an organic earthy scent mixed with herbs that grew in the wild—thyme, lavender, rosemary. The fresh mint that sprawled along the path.

I broke out of the forest and a flock of hawks kettled high above, in swirls and spirals, their movement like the slow stirring of a pot. This wasn't too strange in itself, except they began to do this every day following, at the same time. Cloaked from view, they'd wait in the forest that bordered our schoolyard and then, with a clacking like heavy boards smacking together, they'd alight from the trees and follow me home. Swooping down only as I approached the front door to gather in the majestic oak that rose as solitary sentinel there, roosting on the dead branches that towered up over the living canopy of leaves. This had been happening every afternoon for a week now.

I considered my hawkeyed escort more fascinating than daunting and believed it was somehow linked to the stick-fingers. With my newly sharpened faculties, I combed trails,

Commented [CS12]: Do hawks fly in flocks?

Commented [CS13]: Huh. Not sure I understand what this sound is referring to?

pathways, and roads in search of others. I was hardly surprised when I stumbled across the ring-finger.

One night a spring storm crashed in without warning. We were cozy in my grandfather's library, Tup curled up in front of a fire, me sitting with my legs tucked up under me, drinking ginger tea and reading "The Four Story Mistake" by Elizabeth Enright.

The sky flared with sheet lightning and the wind blew up, rattling the windows and ripping tiles from the roof. My ears rang in a dull roar, as thunder rolled across the sky, thuds that dropped like giant footfalls. A flash... the count: "1... 2..." And the resounding boom as the thunder clapped directly overhead. The house shuddered as though the storm were trying to pick the house up and shake us all out of it. Outside, the ancient oak waved its boughs about madly, swishing this way and that, its massive trunk bending almost to snap in half.

I shut my eyes to blank out unending explosions from above. *It's only thunder, it's only thunder*, I told myself. Fear seized my spine, freezing each bone, one vertebra at a time.

"Ilana." Grandad appeared in the doorway, pipe in hand, peering at us. Me seated on the faded pink velvet settee, with its ornately carved back and feet. Tup lying below the heavy oak mantelpiece, wooden trim dominating the room, criss-crossing beams high above our heads, the walls lined with musty old hardbacked books. The best part of the library, besides all the books, was the old ladder that leaned up against the shelves, attached to rollers along the bottom so we could reach the elusive books up top.

"Tuppence is a good friend to yeh. I'm glad of it, Toots," Grandad said with an approving nod. Toots was his special nickname for my mum, and I wasn't sure if he used it because I reminded him of her or his mind was foggy. Maybe it was a combination of both. But his voice

Commented [CS14]: nice

Commented [CS15]: Nice

Commented [CS16]: I'd love to know more about Ilana. We get a lot of awesome context, but I'm curious about what she wants or is interested in. She feels like a passive character right now?

Commented [CS17]: Not sure how this is connected to him saying her name earlier?

and attentiveness and the satisfied twinkle in his eye were altogether soothing. The edge of my panic waned. Grandad withdrew back into the shadows of the hallway.

Still the wind wailed at the bay window like a banshee trying to break in. Under the storm, ever so subtle, I heard a familiar tapping. The faraway hollow beat that had been haunting me returned. But it didn't grow into a deafening, painful pounding again like it did on that day when I found the first stick-finger. Tonight, during the storm, it steadied itself into a rapping that a fingernail might make on glass.

Tap-tap. Tap-tap. Tap-tap. The relentless sound irritated me now, especially as I tried to focus on my book and not the storm. *Tap-tap. Tap-tap.*

Tuppence raised his head, his ears perked forward.

Tap-tap. Tap-tap.

I rose from the settee and scanned the rain-streaked windows of the library. Receding storm-clouds billowed across the grey sky. Still, the insistent rapping continued. *Tap-tap. Tap-tap.* It was louder than the raindrops. I wondered if it was a bird seeking refuge from the storm.

On a whim, I twisted the old latch and hinged the window open. The wind blew the lashing rain in, shrieking in triumph to have breached the walls, completely soaking me. Like the blast that shattered the window at home, raining down shards on me, prickling across my back. Tuppence jumped to his feet. A barrage of leaves and debris showered the carpet.

Tup quipped out an angry bark at me for inviting in such a disturbance. Wet hair plastered to my face, I pushed against the defiant wind, willing it back out to where it belonged, and fastened the window behind it. And there, on my Uncle's boxy desk was a gnobby twig shaped like a middle finger.

Commented [CS18]: At this point, is she wondering about trees and fingers? This, especially, feels a little passive? I'll ask the others what they think.

Commented [CS19]: I thought up until now it was making one hand and we were looking for all the pieces. But there's been more than one middle finger, so I guess I was wrong 😊

I retrieved the stick-finger with curious sniffs from Tup and examined it on the couch. It had the same knuckles as the others, the folds of wood-flecked bark-like skin, similar grooves and wrinkles, and a pointed fingernail.

As the clouds scudded away from the moon, a newfound energy coursed through my veins. I felt drawn to the skies like the moon pulls at the tides. Excitement pitched low in my belly as twilight fell, the fissure between sundown and moonrise when magic is at its peak.

How did I know this? I can't tell you exactly but I just did. And I didn't doubt it for a second. Magic was here and it followed me around, coaxed forth by the timbered fingers.

In the morning, after the storm, the lawn was littered with loose sticks and leaves. Whole branches had been ripped from the giant oak and lay in pieces across the front yard. I threw on my rubber boots to help my grandad clear the debris away.

"Be careful," he warned, heaving a large branch into his wheelbarrow. Grandad wiped his forehead in a lingering wind. "It's been a harsh spring, harshest I've seen in a while. Watch yeh'self, there are loose branches above."

I glanced up the tall length of the oak's massive, twisted trunk. I felt the presence of the waning moon that hung persistent in the sky, attuned to her phases. New, in her first quarter. I began to gather up broken twigs.

Of course I looked for more fingers. I wasn't disappointed.

Lodged in the mud at the foot of the beleaguered oak were a pinky and thumb. The gnarled pinky stood straight up, the thumb as crooked as Tup's hind leg. They could have fallen from the old oak, though they were similar to the other finger-sticks, which I'd found in different places.

Commented [CS20]: Why? What does she think it means? How is it different or what does it change or give her hope for?

Commented [CS21]: Did I miss that he was injured?

I yanked them out of the muck, holding them close in the palm of my hand. Rigid and fixed and strong, the pinky reminded me of the sign-language symbol for “i.” The thumb gave me an unmistakable but twisted thumbs up. When I touched it I knew what I had to do.

I had all five fingers of one hand.

I stumped away, my uncle shouting after me, “Ilana, don’t track mud through the house! Ilana...”

When I didn’t answer, he became annoyed. “Did yeh hear what I said? It’s polite to answer when yer spoken to.”

“Yes, I heard you,” I snapped over my shoulder, which wasn’t like me. I felt wilful and belligerent though I wasn’t sure why. A fire burned in my belly.

I ran up the spiral back stairs to my room, taking two steps at a time, Tuppence traipsing behind, muddy paws and all.

So much for not tracking mud through the house... I shrugged and pulled the lockbox out from under my bed. Flipping its lid, I regarded the three fingers splayed inside on the mossy green velvet with a kindling desire. I collected them up, a thrumming in my ears growing steadily louder. The moon drew me back outside. To a shrouded corner of the garden where a broken-down arbor leaned over an old marble sundial. I wiped cedar sprigs and dirt from its lichen surface and arranged the fingers dead center, placing them in the form of an open hand, following an innate impulse to bring them all together.

So positioned, each outstretched stick-finger began to vibrate. The pinky, ring finger, middle finger, index finger, thumb shook with more force, and then slammed together, drawn to each other like a magnet to steal. Fibrous strands of wood, filaments of bark, stretched over each digit, writhing like snakes, knitting the fingers into a full hand.

Commented [CS22]: Oh, so it is one hand. You do have double middle fingers, I think?

Commented [CS23]: An odd change—the wilful and belligerent part is telling rather than showing, which is what the rest of the sentence is doing (you need a balance, so do with that what you will)

How is she usually with Grandpa? How does she feel about him? He’s not a comfort exactly, he’s a question mark because he might be confused. Is that an opportunity or yet another thing to fear?

Commented [CS24]: cool

Tuppence backed away with a whine, his tail between his legs.

Rapt, I watched the fingers flex and form a fist. Wonder filled me, trapping my breath in my throat, mixing with a foreboding sense of dread. Like something larger than us was growing. Expanding. Looming.

The instant the hand became whole, there was an earth shattering CRACK and a WHOOSH, followed by a resounding BOOM! I felt it in my teeth, a violent jarring just like the explosions back home during the blitz. I crouched low to protect myself, synapses firing fear in rapid repeat, my body trembling uncontrollably. There was nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. The weight of terror from above bore down on me.

I looked frantically for Tuppence but he had skulked away. The ringing in my ears grew brassier, a *clink-clinking* of chimes. My heartbeat pounded in time. I had to do something to drive away the helplessness that washed over me. With a growl that started low in my belly, I lunged at the sundial, pounding at the timber-fingered hand in a frenzied rage. Each blow for my mother, father, my brother, my cousins, our lives blown apart by the war. I didn't stop until I had smashed the supplicating fingers to bits.

Sobbing, I staggered through the house, calling for Grandad. Worry tugged my heart low in my chest. I heaved the front door open and gasped at the carnage laid out in front of me.

The force of the storm had uprooted the giant oak, its tangled network of roots reached high into the air, topsy turvy like my world had become. Its waylaid trunk skewered the front of the house, thick limbs piercing through the library window and my grandad's bedroom window on the second floor. Even the arched window in the turret was shattered. A hole the size of a car gaped in the roof.

Commented [CS25]: is it...ongoing? Why was she at home during the blitz when it's obvious she's been sent away now? How long was she there for? Just a few days? Weeks? One experience with bombing or many?

Commented [CS26]: Mg?

Commented [CS27]: ...why? I'm not sure I'm connecting the hand to what has happened to her.

Commented [CS28]:Why did she not notice this before?? She was in the house all night. Wouldn't she have noticed?

It wouldn't have fallen now, would it? What changed?

“Grandad!” My voice clawed at the still air. I ran along the downed trunk, scared of what I might find, expecting to see two legs sticking out from under the tree. I’d seen downed bodies before, covered in dust and debris. I crawled under the collapsed canopy, the umbrella of leaves that shrouded the front lawn. The wheelbarrow sat upended and empty on the gutted lawn, branches were strewn everywhere.

There was no sign of Grandad. Anywhere.

Commented [CS29]: nice

Commented [CS30]: peripherally