

Episode 301

Josie

Josie: I saw a dead man this afternoon on my way home from the theater. I suppose that isn't a big deal, not anymore. I go to the cinema nearly every day—there is so much time to kill now that I'm not at Bletchley Park. Today was a film called *His Girl Friday*, with Cary Grant. I've already forgotten most of the plot, but it did distract me for an hour or two.

We're supposed to be in every night before it gets dark, obviously, but it still feels strange to go to the movies during the day. It's so dark inside, as it has to be. When I come out into the afternoon sunlight, it always takes me a moment to get my bearings. Today there was a pile of rubble along one of the side streets off Leicester Square, where the cinema is. I usually cut through there to get to the Underground station, but it had been hit last night and there were still workers trying to clear it away. I was still getting accustomed to the brightness and so I nearly stumbled on the wreckage before I realized what I was about.

At this point a bomb site is rather old hat, and even seeing the bodies isn't anything to remark, though it's always upsetting. Whether or not they created the job as a way to appease me, my role as "unofficial observer" means I don't turn my face away from even the most difficult scenes. After the past several months, you can't continue being devastated by every corpse on the street. You can't maintain that kind of horror.

I realized I shouldn't be there, and a member of the fire brigade told me so just to be sure. I turned to retrace my steps into the square, and I saw a body lying on the pavement at the edge of the rubble. It was a man, in his early sixties if I had to guess, wearing an air raid warden vest. His skin was gray with dust, and his left leg ended in a ragged tear just below the knee. If there

was any doubt of his being dead, the unnatural angle of his head, laying aslant on a broken neck, removed it completely. I marked him, and I felt sad for him, especially as he died doing his job to help the rest of us. But I wouldn't have even thought about him again.

Except that, as I stepped into the street to avoid the mess, the body sat up. That horribly misplaced head swung around toward me, casting off a cloud of dust, and he smiled. I wish it was the first time.

[Theme music; opening credits]

Josie: I didn't set out to write to you about this. I just wanted you to know more about me. I had imagined you might try to find me one day, and that you would want to know who I was, who I am. Then I could tell you about my life—about school and getting recruited by Turing and about everything that happened after I moved to England. And in a way I still hope for that. But honestly it's less and less likely with every bomb that falls. So I'm getting it down on paper, even though it's only slightly more likely to find its way to you that way. I don't even know where I'd send it. At least, that's why I decided to do this, why I went to the stationer's last week and bought this box of paper, a new pen, and three bottles of ink. The day after I moved into these rooms in Mrs. Bowen's house.

But then I started seeing them. Sometimes blown apart like the older gentleman this afternoon, sometimes soldiers who looked alive and healthy, once a little boy with skinned knees and a dusty cloth cap. All dead, all looking at me. *Noticing* me. So far only four or five in maybe eight days. But it is, as you might imagine, unsettling.

I can't really say anything to anyone else. I don't know that many people here, and it's

not the kind of thing to report back to Bletchley Park. Mrs. Bowen, who owns the house, is a dear old thing, but I feel she already finds me a little odd. Being unmarried at thirty seems to trigger some vague suspicions in her, and my not being able to give a lot of information about what I'm doing over here doesn't help. I suppose she thinks I'm some sort of American floozie, or a khaki-whacky, chasing soldiers. So I'm trying my best to appear respectable.

Not that I mind what people think of me. But I'm glad to have the rooms, so cheap and so well-situated, so I don't want to get thrown out. There's plenty of space to be had in London right now, of course, but not at this price. It's a whole house, two stories with a big porch on the front, set back from the street a little. It's near a little park, and there's a big beautiful old tree right in front of my window. It hardly feels like it's in the city, though it's only a few minutes to the Underground. I've got four rooms altogether: a sitting room, or lounge, a small kitchen, a spare room that's mainly got boxes of books in it right now, and a little bedroom right at the back. There's a tiny washroom as well. It's practically a palace for the money.

I gather that Mrs. Bowen lost her husband in '17, and she's had to rent out parts of the house to make do. Poor thing. Right now it's just her on the ground floor, and I split the upstairs with another woman, another widow called Mrs. Irving, who I gather is some sort of fortune teller. At any rate she has customers into the rooms. It's fairly ideal, though after sharing space with so many at Bletchley Park it can get rather lonely. I keep a table in the lounge for puzzles and number games to pass the time. Just to keep my hand in, you see?

I am supposed to "keep an eye out," according to my superiors at Bletchley. They hinted that there was a network of Nazi-sympathizers in the city, and that doesn't surprise me. I don't know exactly what I'm supposed to be looking for, and honestly I think they may have just invented it as a way to keep me occupied. I didn't leave under the best of circumstances, to say

the least, but they pretended kindness til the end.

I still have my name tag: Josephine Waters. I prefer “Josie,” but they wouldn’t let me put that on the tag. Not official enough. Bletchley Park is very concerned with appearing official, maybe because they didn’t take Turing seriously when it all started.

My days are sort of shapeless. I don’t really know anyone here in London; all my friends were other cryptographers in the Government Communications Office. I was there a little less than a year--came over right after Dunkirk. Turing himself recruited me out of the graduate program at Cornell. I left three semesters before finishing my PhD. Your grandparents will probably never forgive me for that, but I felt like I had to do *something*. The stories from the war were so horrible, so *big*, and Uncle Sam won’t get involved. And mom and dad were already growing distant.

So I came over here because I wanted to help. And for a while I was. But now... Now I just feel so *helpless*. The bombs are always falling. France is gone now, along with what feels like all of Europe. It feels like the world is ending and there’s nothing I can *do*.

So I go to concerts. I go to the cinema. I walk the streets, eat at restaurants, go to museums. There’s a basement shelter in Mrs. Bowen’s house, so I usually don’t have to go to the public shelters when the sirens start, but sometimes if I’m out later than I planned or the raids start early I end up in the crypt at St.-Martins’-in-the-Fields or in one of the Tube stations. Every moment is balanced on a razor’s edge between waiting for the bombs to fall and “carrying on,” as the British are so fond of saying.

Now that it’s getting somewhat warmer, I sometimes sit on the porch and have a drink with Mrs. Irving. As I said, she’s an amateur fortune-teller. She has a little deck of tarot cards and a book that explains how to read palms. She has offered several times to “do a reading” on

me, but so far I've been able to gracefully decline. I can't tell how serious she is about all that mumbo-jumbo, but she's a dear old thing, and I enjoy our talks.

It first happened a little over a week ago. I was at a concert in Hyde Park, a volunteer orchestra valiantly attempting Beethoven's 5th symphony. E.M. Forster famously called the 5th symphony "the most sublime noise to ever penetrate the ear of man," and I suppose under other circumstances that may be true. But they did the best they could, earnest older women who had dusted off their childhood violins, assailing the master with grim determination. That might have been the problem—I can't remember a more joyless performance of the 5th. There was a young airman sitting next to me on the grass, free on leave I assumed. I had been wary when he sat down—some on-leave soldiers feel entitled to whatever liberties they please—but he had spent the entire performance in rapt attention. When the final movement ended, we all applauded, because really they had done their very best, and I turned to the airman and asked what he had thought.

He looked at me smiling, and said "It's almost worth dying for." It was such a strange thing to say, I thought I must have misheard him. I looked more closely at him, a young man in an airman's uniform, probably ten years my junior. I thought it odd he wasn't wearing a coat; the weather had turned recently, but it still grew chill in the early evening. I said, "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

And then I saw it. Just above his eye, nearly hidden by the brim of his cap, a neat, round hole with a small trickle of red running into his hairline. He kept smiling, and said, "It's almost worth it, to be able to sit here and listen to the music. I wish I had been here." And then he trembled like a heatwave, and faded into nothing.

No one else was near us. No one seemed to have seen the young man. Or at least... There was one other man, a man closer to my own age who was a few yards away, buttoning his overcoat and preparing to leave. As he settled his hat on his head I saw him looking at me. I must have seemed flustered—who wouldn't be?—because he raised his eyebrows, inquiringly. I smiled and shrugged, and gathered my own things to leave.

By the time I got back to Mrs. Bowen's, I had convinced myself that I had imagined it. One sees so many gruesome things that surely it must affect our brains. But even then, I didn't quite buy that rationalization. I know I didn't because I didn't mention it to Mrs. Bowen or Mrs. Irving. If I truly believed I had imagined it, I would have. "You'll never believe the silly thing I thought I saw..." I would have said. But I didn't. I kept it to myself, even though I had dinner with both of them that night, at Mrs. Bowen's big oaken kitchen table. She does three or four meals a week for us, as part of the rent. That night I was quiet, and listened to Mrs. Bowen talk about her grandson Harry, who is a lieutenant in the Royal Navy. I made small talk and then went to bed.

And then the next day it happened again. I was buying cloth to repair an old dress, and the woman in line behind me had a ragged wound in her left side. She smiled at me and faded away, just like the boy at the concert.

I admit to being afraid, that first time, and I don't pretend to have an explanation. I was wide awake, in full light, and I hadn't been drinking. I'm a very straightforward and logical person in general, a mathematician and a cryptographer, not given to flights of fancy. I know there's an explanation, as there is for every odd phenomenon. And since it does keep happening, I plan to find out what that explanation is.

I suppose I'll have more to say in later letters. I do so hope these find you eventually. I

don't know where you are right now, but I know you're better off than you would have been with me. I was only sixteen, and mother and father were so angry. I knew I wanted to go to a university, and that you wouldn't have the life you needed with me. Sixteen is still a child, and children can't raise children. Or they shouldn't, at any rate. I hope you're happy and safe. In the midst of all this death, it feels hopeful, somehow, to remember the tiny spark of life I sent out into the world. I'll write more later. Until then, I am your affectionate,

Josie

[Theme music; end credits]