

Episode 302

Slaughter

Josie: There's a place in the sitting room where some chair or other has evidently knocked into the wall and marred the plaster in a roughly oval area the size of my palm. The accretion of smoke and dirt over time has polluted the uniform off-white of the walls to a dingy brownish-gray, but this damaged place has bruised it a bright periwinkle blue, the color of an older paint that still lurked brightly beneath the surface, exposed to the light after who knows how many years by the broken plaster. And along the edges of the hole you can see other paint colors, and at least one layer of wallpaper with busy Victorian flowers and a velvet sheen. Half a dozen colors and patterns, laid one on top of the other, to a thickness of half an inch and a hundred years.

I don't know how old the house is. Mrs. Bowen says it's the oldest in the neighborhood, but she thinks it may have been moved from somewhere else. I wish I could read the palimpsest of the wall like a code and decipher the history of the house. But even with my head for puzzles, that one is beyond me. I don't know who lived here before me, before Mrs. Bowen bought the place in the 20s. There are traces, clues like the hole in the wall. And, of course, there's the plaque.

There's a little plaque on the door to my apartments in Mrs. Bowen's house. I don't think it's as old as the house, but it's definitely old. It's made of brass, and it has something engraved on it that is too old to make out—time and dirt have effaced it so that you can only make out the last few letters: "A-U-G-H-T-E-R." It's possible that the first part had been removed purposefully, if crudely; there are scratches along the length of the plaque that seem to indicate

someone trying to scrape it clean.

There is a space on at least two of the other doors in the house where there might have been a similar plaque, lighter oblongs of paint with empty holes where screws may have held the brass. Mine is the only one still intact, and as I say you can only make out the last bit. Mrs. Irving and I looked at it together right after I moved in. We played a game to guess what the word had been. Mrs. Irving suggested it could have been “daughter,” and I said I hoped it was “laughter.”

Mrs. Bowen, coming up the stairs at the moment to bring me some fresh linens for the bed, stopped and looked with us. I asked her what she thought it said. Mrs. Bowen, who has not built a reputation for levity, frowned over the question. I laughed and told her our guesses.

“It’s a war outside,” she said, like I had broken some rule of decorum. “The only word for that is ‘slaughter.’”

So that sobered us up pretty quickly. Now I don’t look at the plaque if I can help it. Whether or not that’s what it originally said, Mrs. Bowen was right. It’s all slaughter.

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[Theme music; credits]

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Josie: Yesterday was a Monday, and I didn’t go to the cinema nor did I seek out a concert. I slept rather late, scandalously so if I use Mrs. Bowen’s reaction as a yardstick. But I was out of the house by eleven, and I took the Tube into Trafalgar Square where I ate a pastie from a street vendor and then spent several hours in the National Portrait Gallery, wandering among the painted faces with a few dozen other time-killers. When I came out, the sun was orange in the west, and I drifted down towards the Thames to look at the water before I headed back indoors.

As I crossed the Charing Cross footbridge, I noticed a woman standing by the railing, just in the middle of the bridge. She was wearing a threadbare coat, the hem of a dark blue dress showing a little below its edge. Her hair was covered with a kerchief, and her face looked so sad I slowed my pace to look at her. As I neared her, she climbed up onto the lower rung of the railing, her hands gripping the cold metal as she tried to pull herself up and over. I cried out and ran to her, pulling at her coat.

She came down off the railing—half-stepping, half-falling—and turned, pulling her coat free from my grasp. She looked shocked and offended that I had interrupted her. Up close, I saw she was a little younger than me, but I also saw the deep lines around her eyes, the grief carved irrevocably into her face. I noticed her purse, tossed forgotten on the pavement, spilling ration books and lipsticks on the roadway. Her stockings needed mending, and the kerchief around her hair was stained and old.

“Please,” I said. “Please don’t.”

“You don’t understand,” she said, in a heavy Russian accent. “Leave me alone.”

“I do understand,” I said. “I may not know exactly. I mean, I don’t know you or your circumstances. But I know everyone is pushed to the limit. I know a lot of people have thought of it. But it can’t be the only choice.”

She looked wildly at me, and reached out to the railing again. I pulled her arm, getting frantic now, and said again “No, please! You mustn’t!”

But she pushed me off and climbed up again. This time she got nearly over the railing before I could grasp the hem of her skirt. She ended up half laying along the top railing, one leg over, one poised to push her off, into the Thames twenty-five feet below.

“Let go of me,” she said, calmly.

I was crying, I admit. There was so much death, all around us. Like Mrs. Bowen said, it was all “slaughter.” To add this self-destruction to that mix seemed such an atrocity. “Come home with me,” I said. “Whatever has happened, I can help you.”

“You cannot help me,” she said. “You have other tasks.” At least I think that’s what she said. She was steadily pulling away from me, using the railing for purchase. I could barely hold on to her dress and the arm of her coat.

“At least come and have a drink with me,” I said. “Tell me about it. I can listen.” I was openly crying now, clutching at her. “Please don’t jump!”

She stopped struggling, and looked me full in the face. And then I knew. Before she even said it, I knew.

“I have already jumped,” she said. “It was always too late.” And then she coughed, and dark river water poured from her mouth, splashing both of us and staining my dress. I let go of her, and she fell into the air, fading into smoke before she hit the water.

I looked around to see if anyone else had seen, as I habitually do now, but there was no one else on the footbridge with me, except for a tall man in an overcoat and hat, further down toward the south bank. He was too far away for me to tell if he was looking at us or not. He didn’t look at me as I passed him a minute or two later. I must have been the only one to see her.

I admit that I continue to be disturbed by these encounters, of which this is the ninth. But as I said in another letter, there is always an explanation for seemingly inexplicable events. I am approaching this matter logically. So, in order, here are the possibilities that present themselves to me:

1) Am I actually encountering the spirits of the dead in various places around London? Although I can’t rule this out, I haven’t had any other experiences in my life that would indicate

there is such a thing as ghosts. Nor have I ever heard evidence, direct or circumstantial, that pushed me in the direction of belief in an afterlife and therefore the possibility of a soul or spirit clinging to the material plane. Indeed, I haven't seen or heard any convincing evidence that there is anything in existence *but* the material plane.

2) Am I the target of an elaborate hoax? I admit I initially wondered this, but I can't see how it can be true. These aren't sleight of hand tricks. The wounds could be stage make-up, I suppose, but there is no way to fake the people fading into smoke. While I was at the cinema on Saturday I was struck that it could be done with a projector, the so-called "ghosts" being filmed ahead of time. But there is no screen or surface to catch the image, and at any rate most of the encounters have been in broad daylight, and I've had fully interactive conversations with at least three of them.

3) Could I be suffering from delusions, possibly caused by lingering guilt or neurosis after the events that led to me leaving Bletchley Park? This was my primary theory until yesterday. It seemed to cover all contingencies, and also had, from my limited knowledge, a solid scientific grounding. I wouldn't presume to suggest I have "shell shock," as I haven't experienced the horrors of battle firsthand, but to say I am not continually reminded of my role in what happened, even to the point of losing sleep, would be disingenuous. It was a reassuring hypothesis, and I expected to slowly overcome the delusions as I gained distance from what had happened.

Yesterday complicated that theory almost to the point of disqualifying it, however. The woman who jumped from the Charing Cross bridge vomited water over both of us. Even after making the journey back to the house, I had to wring out my blouse and hang it by the fire to dry. A rather concrete delusion, wouldn't you say?

So I am at present left without a working hypothesis. I have tried to note any recurring circumstances around each encounter, but there doesn't seem to be any common factor, other than my presence and the presence of someone who has died and yet is here. All of them seem to be aware of how and where they died. All of them seem somewhat sad but not devastated or angry. None of them ask me for anything or want anything.

I don't like these sorts of puzzles. I can crack any set of numbers of letters, but this kind of esoteric conundrum gives me a headache. I'm planning to go to the British Library and do some research, see if I can find anything about similar phenomena. I don't have anything else to do.

When I got home, still damp, Mrs. Irving was sitting on the porch doing something with her hoodoo paraphernalia. She had laid out some of the cards from her Tarot deck in a random spray of piles on the little round table between the two chairs, and was glancing back and forth between them and a little leather book she had open on her knees. The cards were piled among the tea things, and I could see she had spilled some cake crumbs on a few of them.

"Would you like a cup of tea, dear?" she asked as I came up from the street.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Irving," I said, "I need to change."

I walked past her, going into the house, but she called after me.

"Did you meet someone today, Miss Waters? Someone you didn't expect?"

I felt a chill, not from the cold of the wet blouse, but a ripple of gooseflesh that ran from my scalp down my back and arms, lifting the hairs across my body like electricity.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I tried to keep my voice calm, and I think I succeeded. Things had gotten so strange that for a moment it felt entirely likely that Mrs. Irving knew what sort of someones I had been meeting on the streets of London. That's ridiculous, of course.

“My cards say you were to meet someone today,” she said, sipping her tea and peering at me over the cup. “Will we be having a gentleman caller one of these days?”

I relaxed. Simple maiden aunt concern for my baffling unmarried-ness. “I wouldn’t hold my breath, Mrs. Irving,” I said. “There are no gentlemen left in England under sixty.”

“Well, then there’s hope for me yet,” she said, and giggled to herself like she had said something terribly risqué.

I went inside.

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As I write this to you, I’m sitting in the basement with Mrs. Bowen and Irving, listening to the distant sound of bombs falling across the city. We have a small wooden table, and a kerosene lamp that sends black oily smoke curling across the low ceiling.

I miss you. That might seem like a strange thing to say. But I’ve imagined you so often that I can almost see you. In my mind, you have my eyes, greenish with a little gold around the edges, and dark hair, also like mine, I suppose. Do you love numbers like I do? I hope you grew up with a family who saw the German threat for what it was. I hope you’d be proud of the work I did.

At any rate, I am grateful that you’re too young to fight. If America ever does enter the War, I want you safe. That’s what I always wanted.

Every night we sit down here and listen to parts of the city being erased. Every morning I go out into the streets and learn how the geography has changed. Old buildings gone, new craters pockmarking the roadways, exposing layers of hidden city, tunnels and waterlines and gas lines and ancient masonry, things never meant to see the sunlight. London feels like a vast archeological dig, an excavation by madmen.

I am trying not to give in. To keep calm and carry on. But more and more it feels like the best way to do that is to stop imagining that it will end. If this is life from now on, we have to accept it. Hope only brings despair.

That seems a very down note to end on, but I hear the all-clear siren now. Mrs. Bowen has put down her knitting and we're all gathering our things to go back up into the world. It's earlier than usual tonight, so perhaps I can get a full night's sleep. I'm sure I'll write again tomorrow. You can't know it, but I think of you constantly.

All my love,

Josie

[Theme music; credits]

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