

Episode 303

Enigma

Josie: It's called the Enigma Machine, and it is the most advanced encryption tool in the world. It completely encodes messages at the level of individual letters

Turing recruited me, and a lot of others like me, to break its code, and I crossed the ocean in June of last year. Turing has invented a new supercomputer, the Bombe, which was basically eight Enigmas wired together, and we use it to decrypt German communications, usually troop movements. For instance, if we learn where one of the U-boat wolf packs is lurking in the North Atlantic, we can make sure our ships avoid it. There were loads of us working on it in the big house at Bletchley Park. It was thrilling to be performing such an important service. Until it wasn't.

All of this, of course, is the toppest of top secrets. I'm not allowed to tell anyone why I'm here. Not even my parents know—it's one of the reasons they won't speak to me now. They think I just abandoned my studies on a whim, that I'm larking about in Europe. As if there's any larking in Europe now.

But since I don't even know where to send these letters, I think I'm safe. If I make it through the war, I'll find you and give these to you. If I don't, then it won't matter what I scribbled on some notepaper amidst the rubble.

But no one knows about it. Even most high-level military personnel only have a vague idea what goes on at Bletchley Park. Which is why what happened yesterday was so upsetting.

I was leaving the cinema. There's this new spine-tingler out called *The Wolf Man*, with Lon Chaney, Jr. It's about a werewolf—Chaney's character turns into a half-man, half-wolf

when the moon is full. I expect you've seen it, maybe? I don't know if you're allowed to see horror films. It's quite good, and quite horrifying, as it's meant to be. The idea that someone could look normal and have this beast just under the surface is, well, it's a little on the nose these days.

I was walking down the Edgware Road, thinking of picking up something for dinner to surprise Mrs. Bowen with, when I noticed a man following me.

I'm not unusually paranoid; even though I'm supposed to be watching for conspirators I'm not prone to seeing Nazis behind every bush. But I had seen this man before. When I met the drowned woman on the Charing Cross Bridge a few days ago, this man had been walking on the bridge toward us. I had assumed he was a random passerby, and I had also assumed he hadn't seen what I had seen.

But here he was again, in a different part of the city, just behind me, keeping steady pace with me as I moved through the other pedestrians on the pavement. I know it was the same man—he had an unusual stain on the shoulder of his overcoat, a brownish smear in the shape of a lopsided flower, or a misshapen hand. I had noticed it on the bridge the first time.

I'm not one to be intimidated, and I immediately bristled at the thought of being targeted. To be sure, I turned down a side street, and sure enough I heard the click of his shoes on the cobbles following. I stepped into the street and turned to face him.

“May I ask why you are following me?” I said. I keep a small pen-knife in my purse. My hand sought it as I spoke.

The man took his hat off and inclined his head toward me in acknowledgment. “You haven't guessed?” he asked. He didn't seem the least surprised that I had confronted him. He seemed, if I'm being honest, to have almost expected it.

“I have no idea who you are,” I said. “Tell me why I shouldn’t yell for a policeman.”

“I’m sure you can work it out,” he said. “After breaking the Enigma code, I could hardly be a challenge.”

{Theme music; credits}

When I was a child I was afraid of thunderstorms. I would cry and hide under the covers, and when it got too loud or overwhelming, I’d pad down the hall and climb into bed with my mother and father, who were never too happy to be woken up. When I was seven, my father decided I was quite old enough to weather storms on my own, so he taught me to count between the lightning and the thunder. I suppose this is a common way to get children to calm down. The lightning flashes, and you count the seconds. One-one thousand. Two-one thousand. Three one-thousand. When the thunder came, you had a piece of data. After another round—lightning, counting, thunder—you had enough data to reach a simple hypothesis: the storm is either coming closer or moving further away. A third cycle and you had tested your hypothesis and knew what to expect. Even if it proved the storm was approaching, I knew it was moving, even had a vague sense of how fast. So I knew it wouldn’t last. It was passing over. It was my first exposure to something resembling scientific method. I wasn’t afraid of the thunder again.

I’m not a scientist, of course. But I am a devotee of data. If I can have the numbers, the percentages, the *odds*, then I can find my footing. I think that thunderstorm lesson, combined with my dad doing the crossword puzzles in the paper with me every morning, was the beginning of my love affair with data, the only love affair I’ve ever had, your father notwithstanding.

When the stranger in front of me revealed that he knew my biggest secret, I began

running numbers. I asked questions to stall for time, but I was calculating, extrapolating based on all the data I could gather.

His name, he told me, is Ramsey Whateley-Campbell, and he came from the Midlands, somewhere near Nottingham, he said. He said he was part of a group who were trying to bring peace to the city, which is a frankly ridiculous thing to say as we stood on the bomb-stippled streets. He was older than me, with gray showing at his temples. His hair was close-cropped, and his eyes were a pale blue. I'd think him handsome if he wasn't skulking after me through the streets like a movie villain. His overcoat hid most of his body. I couldn't tell if he carried a gun.

"The best way to bring peace is to support the war effort," I said. I was irritated that he had pulled me into the conversation, but I couldn't let it go without comment. I'm all for peace, but I don't see the good of protesting the war while the Luftwaffe literally tore the city down around us. "We didn't start this," I added.

"You misunderstand," he said. "And I think you may be more disillusioned with the 'war effort' than you pretend."

"I don't know what you think you know about me," I began, but he kept talking.

"We are not what you think. We have a very specific way of stopping the bloodshed." He gave me a card with his name and a phone number on it, pulling it from his inside pocket as if we were at a dinner party. "Call us if you want the ghosts to stop."

I left, walking quickly through the little street to meet the Marylebone [MAR-LE-BONE] Road, where I tried to disappear into the crowd before catching the Tube at Baker Street. He didn't follow me.

But I took his card.

What do you make of that? I didn't have time to really process it—Mrs. Bowen was

laying tea on as I got back to the house. We ate on the porch, and I watched the wind in the leaves of the old oak tree while Mrs. Bowen read out the latest letter from her Harry. Mrs. Irving shuffled through her Tarot cards and tried to convince me to let her do a reading, asking me again if I had met someone. I don't feel like that's terribly ominous—she asks me every other day if I met someone, and even a stopped clock is right twice a day.

I eventually pled a headache and went to sit under the oak tree. There used to be a swing there, I suppose, because I could see the frayed ends of two ropes hanging from a branch above my head. They looked old, gray and stiff, and I wondered briefly what bygone child had swung on them, kicking their feet up in the London dusk.

And then I saw someone standing across the road. A woman, maybe 50, maybe 60, standing in the little front garden of the house opposite. She didn't live there, at least I'd never seen her before. She was examining some ivy that ran along the stone wall between the garden and the street, but when I saw her she looked up at me, as if she knew I was there, as if she had been waiting to be noticed. By now I recognized the signs. I knew she was dead.

I glanced back at the porch, but Mrs. Irving was helping Mrs. Bowen gather the tea things and neither were paying attention to me. I stood up and crossed the street. The woman waited for me.

She was wearing a strange dress, like a shift, but made of some rough fabric, coarse and loose-woven, almost like sack-cloth. Up close I could tell she was younger than I had guessed, maybe not much older than me, but she had been ravaged by some disease. Her eyes were sunken in her face, ringed dark with fatigue, and there were ugly swollen places on her neck and at her armpits. One of these, under her jaw, had broken open and was leaking a yellowish fluid down her neck, staining the edge of her dress. She faced me across the stone wall.

As I approached she looked vaguely away, a little over my shoulder, as if she were blind. But when I reached her, she turned her gaze directly on me and said, “All the girls in our town ring for little Josie.” Her voice was flat, emotionless.

It felt like all the air were pulled out of my lungs. I had never heard one of the ghosts call me by name.

“What do you want?” I said. “Why are you here?”

“Ashes,” she said. I think that’s what she said.

“Ashes?” I asked. “What does that mean?” I was near tears.

She held my gaze a moment longer. And then it happened, as it always does. The sirens began. I had to get inside.

“Why are you here?” I asked again.

She looked into the sky, like we all do when the warnings begin. Then she looked back at me and smiled. I wish I hadn’t seen the smile.

She said, still smiling, “We all fall down.” And she faded.

I ran back across the street, down to the basement. My housemates were already there, pattering.

So those two things back to back—the man following me and talking about the ghosts, the ghost calling me by name—have led me back to one of my earlier hypotheses. I don’t know if it’s a hoax, per se, because I still can’t understand how the ghosts could be faked. But it’s clear that I’m being targeted. The man, Ramsey Whatley-Campbell, said to call him if I wanted the ghosts to stop. Does he mean that he or his group is responsible? What could that mean?

I’m disturbed by two thoughts. Well, I’m disturbed by a lot of thoughts, if I’m being honest, including the causes of my exile here in the city. But here are two new ones. The woman

across the street was not a victim of the bombs. Everyone else I've met, all the other London dead who have seen me and been seen, were war casualties, or so I thought. Bodies at bomb sites, soldiers. So many are dying every day, here and abroad, and there are plenty of dead to go around. But this woman, in her peasant garb and suffering from some horrible disease, she wasn't killed by bombs or German bullets. I'm not a historian, but I know what the Great Plague was. She seems to indicate this is bigger than the war.

But, strange as this may seem to say, I'm more disturbed by Whateley-Campbell knowing that I'm a codebreaker. That he knows about Bletchley Park at all.

When I left the Communications Department, or rather when I was asked to leave, they told me to "keep an eye out." Sergeant Waverly, who was my immediate superior, implied that there were sympathizers in the city, or possibly a spy network. It was fairly common knowledge that the Nazis had spies throughout the Empire, even if we didn't talk about it openly. Sergeant Waverly wanted me to report back if I quote "saw anything."

I don't believe he was serious. I know he was throwing me a bone. They didn't believe I was actually going to discover a spy network. But that doesn't mean I haven't kept my eyes open. And I know enough to be putting the pieces together when I'm systematically followed by someone who has knowledge of top secret operations.

Bletchley Park sent me away because they thought I couldn't handle it. I assume Whateley-Campbell and his group have targeted me because they see me as a weak link.

But I'm not weak. I left my life in the U.S. To do what I can to fight the enemy. That hasn't changed because I no longer work on the Enigma project.

This is just another puzzle. Another code. If I can get close enough to it, gather enough data, I can solve it. And if I can solve it, we can neutralize it.

Mrs. Irving keeps interrupting my writing. She's pestering me to let her do a reading. I may give in just to pass the time. The bombs are falling elsewhere tonight—I can hear them in the distance, but we're not in danger. Tonight I'll drink tea, and make small talk. Maybe let Mrs. Irving play with her cards.

Tomorrow I'm going to call the number on this card. I'll have more to say later.

Yours as always,

Josie

[End music; credits]