

Episode 305

Deep

When you finally solve a puzzle that you've spent a significant amount of time on, you get a feeling like all the planets have aligned. Like tumblers falling into place in a combination lock. For a little while—how long depends on the difficulty of the code and how long I worked on it—everything feels a little lighter and I have a sense of things being somehow *right* in the world. I remember feeling it when I did crosswords and other word games as a kid, and when I solved quadratic equations in school. When I literally graduated to extremely complex math at Cornell, the feeling was the same. A powerful release that was almost physical. It's a heady feeling, and one that I can become sort of addicted to.

I had decoded a few small transmissions at Bletchley Park before the final, big one. Even though some of our male colleagues thought women weren't up to the intellectual task, there were quite a few of us actually working the Bombe machines and interpreting the decryptions. I was just one of hundreds, working on thousands of communications sent daily by the Germans. But that day in mid-December I happened to get the one that mattered.

It detailed a bombing raid happening that night. It wasn't the original order, just a confirmation, but it had exact information—numbers of planes, which sites were being targeted, everything. It took me some time, because there was a lot of gibberish at the front end. They often put untranslatable garbage, random letters or numbers, at the beginning of transmissions to throw us off the scent. But once I found the trail, it all fell into place, just like pushing over a line of dominoes.

It was a strike on a small city in the midlands, Hawthorne, where there were a couple of munitions factories and a small airfield. The town was not large, but it wasn't a village either,

and there were more than 10,000 civilians at risk from the bombs. The horrors of Coventry were still fresh in our minds, and the thought of another strike of that magnitude chilled my heart.

Breaking that code was biggest feeling of rightness and alignment I've ever felt. When I finally understood what I had, my heart leapt into my chest. This is why I was here. I had trained and studied and become one of the best at what I did, and now the payoff had come. My work would save all those lives. All those innocents. I ran to Sergeant Waverly to show him what I'd discovered.

I'm telling you this so you can understand what happened when I spoke to the woman in the Mark Lane Underground shelter. She had been in the alleyway with Whateley-Campbell and the others, but I didn't think she'd know who I was. I sat by her and asked what she was knitting. She held up the scarf for me to see.

"It's beautiful," I said, and it was. Bright red and dark green, interwoven in an intricate pattern that must have taken years of practice to achieve.

"Thank you, dear," she said. She didn't look up from her work.

"It looks like we both got caught out," I said. I wanted to draw her out, to get her talking in the hopes she'd let some information slip.

"We were coming from the same place," she said, and she looked at me sideways, cutting her eyes at me quickly and then looking back at the knitting needles, which never stopped.

"I was out with friends near the Tower," I lied. "It looks like you've been shopping."

"We both know where you were," she said.

I realized I had miscalculated, but I kept trying. "I think you might have me confused with someone else," I said.

"I know who you are, Josephine Waters," she said. "And I know you'll come around

eventually. Because you want to save us all.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Save who?”

“London. England. All of us. The way you didn’t save Hawthorne.”

And I didn’t have an answer. I don’t know how she knew so much about me, but she was right. I had broken the code, and I had told the people who needed to be told. And none of it mattered.

Those civilians died anyway. Hawthorne burned like I told them it would. Because we let it.

[Theme music; credits]

She said her name was Irene Nesmith, and that she was a housewife from Croydon. When I asked about her connection to Whateley-Campbell, she didn’t try to deny it.

“We only want what’s best for the city,” she said. “We’ve got to stop the bombing, haven’t we?”

But when pressed as to how they planned to do that, she wouldn’t tell me, saying only I should “have a nice sit-down” with Whateley-Campbell and see what I could do to help. When I asked how she knew who I was, she outright ignored me, and started packing up her knitting.

“Where are you going?” I asked. “We haven’t had the all-clear. We can’t leave.”

There were dozens of other people around us, mostly men given our proximity to the City and its offices, but some women, and even a few families. There were not nearly as many children in London, but some families had kept their children close. Some of them were playing cards or backgammon, some were quietly talking, smoking cigarettes. Many were beginning to

bed down for the night—the raid wouldn't last forever, but walking home through the rubble-strewn streets in the blackout wasn't safe, even if it had been allowed. I knew when I walked down the steps of Mark Lane I wouldn't be coming out until sunrise.

Mrs. Nesmith gathered her things and wandered off through the crowd, clearly wanting to move away from me. I let her go. I admit to being tired and more than a little grumpy—it had been a long day and had ultimately raised more questions than it had answered. I smoked a cigarette and played canasta with two stenographers until I got sleepy, and then I folded my coat into a semblance of a pillow and went to sleep.

At some point I woke up. I don't know what time it was, but it seemed like everyone else on the platform was asleep. There were electric lights burning, but they were dim, and shadows filled the Mark Lane station. I felt like I had heard something, that some noise was just ending as I came awake. I sat up, the tiles of the station wall cold through the thin fabric of my dress. I waited to see if the noise would come again. The bombs had long since stopped, and the only sound was the mingled breathing of a hundred or so exhausted Londoners.

I was just about to turn over and try to go back to sleep when it came again. It was a slow rasping sound, like something very heavy or very large moving against stone. I felt a chill run across my body, deeper than the actual cold, I was suddenly very aware of the fact that I couldn't get out if I wanted to. It was dark, and there were sleeping bodies massed between me and the exit. Even if I could get up the several sets of stairs, the streets were no safe haven.

The sound came again, something big sliding across a floor or against a wall. It sounded closer, and I could pinpoint its direction now. It was coming from the tunnels, from deep between stations in the darkness along the tracks. No trains were running at this time of night, and at any rate this was not a mechanical sound. It was decidedly organic, a *living* sound. I

couldn't make my mind imagine what kind of thing would make a sound like I heard.

I strained my eyes toward the blackness of the tunnel opening, trying to make out anything beyond the weak reach of the station lights. It was useless, of course. The murk was impenetrable. But as I looked, I noticed someone else awake on the platform. Yards away from me, just by the tunnel opening, sat Irene Nesmith, propped against the station wall, knitting. She was watching me, smiling, and I *knew* she had heard the same sound and that she knew what it was.

I don't know how I got back to sleep. I must have, because I woke up as people began moving out early the next morning. I tried to find Mrs. Nesmith in the throng, but I couldn't see her. I also tried to get a better glimpse into the tunnel, but there were dozens of people moving me forward like a leaf on a river, and it wasn't any brighter than it had been in the wee hours. I let myself be carried along with the flow of people it deposited me on the pavement outside.

Mrs. Bowen and Irving fussed over me when I got home—they had no way of knowing where I was and had been worried something horrible had befallen me. They were both happy I was safe and horrified I had slept in a Tube station. The prescription was tea and toast, generously applied. I didn't complain.

One I had changed out of my femme fatale spy get-up, bathed, and come back downstairs, I called Ramsey Whateley-Campbell again. I explained that I had been held up yesterday and was sorry to have missed him. I hoped he hadn't waited too long?

"We can meet today," he said, ignoring my attempts at pleasantries. "Time is getting short, so I hope you will make every attempt to make it."

He gave me an address near Southwark and a time two hours away. I just had time to get there if I left right away. I got dressed, moved my revolver from last night's fancy purse to my

everyday handbag, and left the house.

I had decided to walk, but as I left the little neighborhood where Mrs. Bowen's house stands and became more immersed in the streets of London, I began imagining things. I thought I saw one of the women from the alley the night before, not Irene Nesmith but the other one, who had looked a little younger and had been wearing a flowered dress under her mackintosh. She was standing looking in a shop window on Oxford Street. I ducked into a doorway when I saw her, but then she turned and said something to the man she was with, and I saw I was wrong. She didn't look anything like the woman from the alley. I walked a few more blocks, but I kept thinking I was being followed. I couldn't see anyone when I looked, but I couldn't shake the feeling. Eventually I ducked into the Underground at Tottenham Court and took the Northern line to Waterloo. It was a shortish walk from there to the address Whateley-Campbell had given me.

This wasn't any better, though. In the darkness of the tunnels, I could only think of the sounds I had heard the night before at Mark Lane. What kind of thing could make the sound I heard? Something huge, slow, and hidden, lurking under the city, sliding through the Tube tunnels in the dead of night. If not for Mrs. Nesmith, I would have thought I had imagined it, but she had been watching me, like she was waiting to see how I'd react. The train sped through the tunnel, and I looked out the windows at the blackness, unable to see anything that might be outside the carriage.

It was a relief to emerge into the light at Waterloo Station, and to breathe real air as I walked east toward Southwark. The address I had been given was in the Stamford Road, and in less than ten minutes I was there.

Except there wasn't any *there* there. Instead of a cafe or a bar, the place Whateley-

Campbell had sent me was a bomb crater. This one was relatively fresh and extremely large—nearly thirty feet across and very deep, maybe ten, maybe fifteen feet. I stood at the edge, wondering if I'd gotten the house number wrong, and then I noticed movement in the crater. I looked down, and I saw them.

The crater was crawling with the dead. Soldiers, air wardens, children, women in Victorian dresses. Two men wearing pantaloons and ruffled Elizabethan collars, both with hangmen's nooses still tied tightly around their swollen necks. Another in peasant garb, a man this time, plague-marked and rotten. A young woman in an old-fashioned nightdress with blood running down her face from a wound I couldn't see. And more. All dead, all roaming, all separate and terrible. They climbed and stumbled and reached, trying to find a way out, maybe? Or just restless, unable to settle.

Or at least, that's what they were doing when I first looked down. They were a moving mass, a concentrated knot of the writhing dead. But then the bloody woman in the nightdress noticed me, and she stopped and stared at me. Then another, and then another, until, in less than a minute, they were all standing still and silent, looking at me as I stood on the edge of the crater.

Then one moved. A small dead boy of ten or so, emaciated and streaked with dark smudges like soot. He smiled at me, and he lifted his hand and gestured, beckoning for me to come down. To join them. They all watched me, smiling, waiting for me to climb down.

"I wouldn't go down," said a voice at my arm, and I started to find Ramsey Whateley-Campbell standing next to me. "I shouldn't think it's safe," he said.

"Why are they here?" I asked. Because surely this is why he brought me here. To see this slaughtered pageant.

"We summoned them," he said. "My group. Conjured them, I suppose is the word."

I could see the others standing at various points around the edge of the crater: Mrs. Nesmith, the sailor, the younger woman, and others, similarly nondescript but all, like the dead below us, watching me.

“The thing is,” said Whateley-Campbell. “We got it wrong. It’s off. We weren’t trying to summon the dead. Or not these dead.”

I was light-headed and thought I might fall. But I also felt I had no choice but to participate in the surreal conversation. “What were you trying to summon?” I asked.

“Something much older,” he said. “But we aren’t equipped. We need more information. We need you.”

He held up the small leather-bound book I had seen the night before.

“The secret is in here,” he said. “But it’s not written so we can read it.”

“It’s in another language?” I said.

“Not exactly,” he said. “It’s in code.”

He held the book out toward me. The dead and the living seemed to lean forward.

“You’re going to break it for us,” he said.

[Credits; Theme music]

* * *