

Episode 306

Book

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Josie: I've said that the German bombs erase the city, but that isn't strictly true. I mean, obviously when a building is hit, that architecture is erased, removed from the urban canvas like an artist rethinking her work. But it's not the same as, say, using a rubber eraser to remove a pencil mark. What's left behind isn't blank, untouched paper. London has built up in layers over more than a thousand years, so peeling back the surface just leaves an earlier part exposed. Like the layers of paint and wallpaper in my sitting room, you can see what came before if you break the veneer.

In another letter I said London was like an archeological dig, and that's what I meant. We are always standing on a present laid thinly on top of a past which is growing deeper every moment. It doesn't take much digging to travel back in time, or to bring the past forward into the now. All you need is a shovel. Or a bomb.

I didn't think all this as I watched the dead, staring up at me from below the surface of the Stamford Road, feeling the leather binding of the book Whately-Campbell had just handed me cold in my grip. But I *felt* it, if that makes sense. I had a nauseating wave of understanding, an unavoidable knowledge that I was looking down into the past, and that everything around me was sinking into history.

And as I looked, like always, they began to dissolve. First the young chimney-sweep who had beckoned to me moments earlier, then the bloody girl in the nightdress, then the Elizabethan men.

The people on the edge of the crater remained, the members of Whately-Campbell's

group, ordinary-looking Londoners you wouldn't look twice at on the street or at the market, each carrying their own layers that I couldn't see or understand. But in the space of fifteen seconds or so, the whole throng of the silent dead had become a fog, dark as coal-smoke, which diffused into the brittle sunlight like the rest of the haze perpetually in the London skies.

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[Theme music]

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Josie: I couldn't get much more out of him. He told me that they trusted me to decode the book, and that it would all become clearer once I saw what was in it. I asked him how he knew what the book contained, since no one in his group knew how to read it, and he smiled indulgently, like I was a child. I knew that smile from a hundred men at Bletchley Park, at Cornell, at dinner parties and department stores. At that moment I swore that I'd crack the code on the book, whether or not I ever gave the information to Whately-Campbell's group.

“We've got other writings that tell us what kind of thing is in this volume,” he said.

“Trust us. This book will stop the war.”

The others were leaving now, drifting in various directions down side-streets and thoroughfares. They all had strange little half-smiles on their faces, and they moved deliberately but a little more slowly than you would have expected, like sleep-walkers or opium-eaters.

Whately-Campbell nodded at one who passed close by us.

“Who are you people?” I asked.

Whately-Campbell smiled wider. “We are the Order of XXXX,” he said. But I couldn't understand the final word. His voice was audible, and he spoke the word at the same volume as the rest of what he said, but it *blurred*—I don't know how else to say it— and I couldn't make it

out. It was the auditory equivalent of the word being written down and the ink smudged before it was dry.

“The Order has existed for a very long time. It’s finest hour is at hand,” he continued.

“None of this makes any sense,” I said. “I don’t understand any of it.”

He swept his arm, taking in the city rising behind us. “None of this ever made sense,” he said. “The book will explain.”

And that was all. I made my way back to Mrs. Bowen’s, avoiding the Underground.

I met your father when I was fifteen. That was the year Charles Lindbergh flew across the ocean, and we went to New York to see the parade they threw for him. We stayed at the St. Regis, and your father was one of the elevator operators. He was a few years older than me, very tall and sort of handsome. He flirted with me as we went up and down from our floor, and wrote down his address for me when we left. We exchanged letters a few times, and a few months later when he was on a road trip to visit family in the midwest he stopped through our town and took me to the movies. We saw *The Jazz Singer*. I remember being enthralled by the spectacle of an actual *talking* film. Everything was changing, and I was no exception. He held my hand in the dark, and I let him.

I let him do even more after the film ended. Why did I do it? To put it simply—I wanted to know what all the fuss was about. I knew everyone in the world seemed obsessed with sex, and I figured I could get it over with and see why.

I approached it logically, as I did everything. His letters had already showed me he wasn’t someone I wanted to have a long-term relationship with. There was very little chance I’d see him again. But he was a nice person, and seemed to genuinely like me. So I did. It was fine.

He was very gentlemanly and almost apologetic. He went on his way the next morning. We wrote a few more letters after that, but we really had nothing in common. I don't know what happened to him.

I never told him. My parents were so angry, and I didn't want to drag him into it. I had been on dates with several other boys that year—nobody steady—and I refused to tell them who the father was. I knew immediately that you'd be better off with someone else. I wasn't equipped. I don't regret it.

It's only the war that makes me worry. I wanted you safe. And I don't know that anywhere is safe anymore.

I can't imagine what could be in this book that could end the war. But certainly it's worth trying? I don't trust Whately-Campbell, and I don't know what to make of the ghosts. I am moving into very uncomfortable territory. "Ghosts," "summoning." It sounds like a spine-tingler, like *The Wolf Man* or something with Boris Karloff. I don't have any understanding of those sorts of things. I don't even believe in them.

But I know how to break a code.

I got back to my rooms and cleared off the table in the sitting room. I made myself a cup of tea and sat down with the book in front of me.

I'm going to try and describe the book as best I can. It's smaller than a typical novel, roughly 4 inches by 5 1/2. The cover is soft leather, tanned a deep brown color like fallen leaves in November. The spine is stitched together with thick, waxed twine, pulled tight so the leather puckers up slightly around the insertion points. There is no other adornment or marking on the cover. No title or decoration, nothing on the spine. The pages are a rough unlined paper, dark yellow, not quite parchment but definitely thicker than normal paper, especially now. It looks

like a very old, hand-made journal or diary, well-made certainly, but not especially remarkable.

What is remarkable is the writing. I had already glimpsed it from across the bar last night, and I knew it contained two different colors of ink—a dark brown that is almost black, and a rusty red. It appears to have been written by several different writers, whether simultaneously or over a period of years I can't say, but there are clearly multiple different handwritings on display.

I suppose Whateley-Campbell was right that it's written in code, but it's possibly the most complicated code I've ever seen. It can't possibly be consistent. By that I mean I think there are many different codes happening at once in the book. Most of it appears to be gibberish—combinations of letters that don't make sense, unpronounceable jumbles that don't seem to be any language I've ever encountered. Occasionally there's an actual word in English, but they seem isolated, unconnected the writing around them. "Willow" is one of these. "Night." "Heart." "Moon." And in one place, near the end, five words together: "lived raw as a dog," which doesn't mean anything at all.

The rest of it—the bulk of it, if I'm being honest—doesn't even appear to be language. It's all symbols, like a cross between Nordic runes and Egyptian hieroglyphs, but without any of the uniformity I'd expect from those. Assuming there is an underlying code, I can't even see how to begin breaking it. I spent an hour on it this afternoon, but made no headway at all. I pushed it away finally, and wandered downstairs into Mrs. Bowen's floral overstuffed sitting room.

I was exhausted. I had slept poorly in the Tube station the night before, had spent several hours traveling across the city, been accosted by a bomb crater full of ghosts, and endured a futile hour trying to translate what may well be the ravings of a group of asylum inmates. There was still forty-five minutes before Mrs. Bowen laid tea.

I idly picked up an old magazine from the little side table. It was a copy of the *New*

English Weekly from about a year ago. As I flipped through it, I found a long poem by T.S. Eliot. I'm not a follower of literature, but even I had heard of Eliot. I started reading it, but it seemed a little too apt. It may not have been intended to be so bleak, but at that moment I couldn't read it any other way. I put the magazine down and picked up another copy, the next one in the stack.

The same poem was in this one. I put this one down as well. But when I found it yet again in the third issue I opened, I took it as a sign.

I know signs aren't real. I know there is only facts and observable phenomena. But you have to understand, I have observed some decidedly strange and inexplicable phenomena over the last several weeks. I felt really strongly that someone wanted me to read this poem.

The first stanza gives you the flavor:

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to earth
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
Bones of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.
Houses live and die: there is a time for building
And a time for living and for generation
And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane
And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots
And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto.

It continues in similar fashion, for nearly ten pages. I don't know whether to call the poet prescient; the war had already begun when it was written, I assume. But it didn't sit well with me. It felt accurate, and it felt appropriate. But that didn't mean it gave any solace. I am beginning to feel there is no solace in the world.

I know this is a much longer letter than any I've written before. So much has happened in the past day. But even though I may sound despairing in the previous paragraphs, I really do feel invigorated. Whatever this group is, they are real. I've seen them, and I have confirmation that they know about top secret military programs. I don't think they're connected to the Axis powers, but they may be something even more insidious. Ordinary citizens armed with a tiny amount of information, information they may not even understand, can be every bit as dangerous in the long run as the Luftwaffe.

I'm not talking about the "Careless Talk Costs Lives" posters you see around London. I'm not exactly sure what I'm talking about, but Whately-Campbell's group has the feel of vigilanteism. They somehow have access to government secret and they have some vaguely defined plan to "stop the war." I think I'm dealing with anarchists, and I think if I play along I can stop whatever it is they've got planned.

I don't believe anyone can stop the war. But I can do what I can to keep my small part of the world safe.

More tomorrow. Be safe.

All my love,

Josie

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