

Episode 307

Visitation

Josie: Before last night, my biggest worry for you was that you're still in America, because America not only refuses to enter the war, its citizens seem torn over which side to be on. Even after the McCormack-Dickstein investigation, there are groups of people who are decidedly pro-Hitler. Your grandparents, I'm ashamed to say, are among these people. They never went so far as to join the Friends of New Germany or attend a demonstration, but I know they sent money, and I know how they vote. Until a few years ago I would have said they were smarter than that, but I suppose they aren't. Another reason to have cut ties with them. You can't argue with Nazis, and it's much more than a difference of opinion. I hope the people you ended up living with are true Americans. I hope *you* are.

It's different over here, you know. I know there were sympathizers before the war started, but it's difficult to ignore the German threat with the bombs constantly falling.

Last night they were falling relatively nearby. It sounded like King's Cross, or at least over in that direction. The three of us were in the basement, pretending as usual that it was normal. Mrs. Bowen was writing a letter, Mrs. Irving was laying a tarot hand ("for practice" she said) and I was paging through Whateley-Campbell's little code book, trying to find some sort of starting point. It continues to rebuff all my efforts, though I haven't given up hope by any means.

I suppose the sound of the bombs is why I didn't hear it at first. Then I caught it in fragments in the brief silences between the scattering scree of rubble and the screaming fall of the gravity bombs—someone speaking?

The next pause there was no question. Someone was whispering, just on the other side of the basement door. I was closest, my chair pulled up nearly against the jamb. I glanced towards

the others, but they didn't seem to have heard anything. I listened intently, straining to here over the noise from outside. A particularly loud explosion went off—this morning we'd learn it was only two streets over—and in the quiet afterwards I heard the voice clearly:

“Mother, help me. I can't find you.”

When I think about you, I imagine your face, your eyes, your hair. How tall are you at fourteen? Do you have the small crinkles at the corners of your eyes like your father did? I used to wonder if I'd recognize your voice if I heard it in a crowd?

Do I still need to wonder, after last night?

[Theme music; credits]

Josie: There was another student at Cornell who I used to have drinks with occasionally after classes were done for the day. He was a physicist, or was becoming one, the same way I was becoming a cryptologist. We only actually met four or five times, I suppose. He was a champion at talking about his work and his plans, and a total failure at listening to anyone else's. His name was James, but he doesn't matter.

During one of those interminable drinks dates, though, he told me about a theory he was working on for his thesis. James believed, and he supposedly had some proof of this, that there were other worlds existing alongside ours. Other dimensions, other states of existence. Other universes? I don't know what term is best. But other realities, sitting next to ours, separated by I don't know what—something like a thin metaphysical fabric that makes sure we stay over here and whatever is over there stays over there.

“Fabric” is the word he used. I can't remember exactly what his thesis did with this

theory (he was able to make even this fascinating concept imminently boring), but I remember not being able to let go of that thought. Fabric stretched thin between this world and some untold number of others. I wondered aloud if that's what led to people believing in ghosts or an afterlife, and he laughed at me. But I've been thinking about it again in the midst of all this.

My father had an old tweed jacket. He loved it, but after many years he had to get it patched at the elbows. I was nine or ten. I asked him why, and he told me that elbows are hard on jackets, that the constant pressure and rubbing wears the fabric away. Maybe that's what's happening here. Every night the bombs punch through the skin of the city like knives, cutting into the meat of the world. Maybe that constant punching and tearing wears away the fabric between the worlds? Maybe it's getting thin enough that we can see through, catch glimpses of the other side?

Whateley-Campbell says his group has been trying to summon something, and that they got it wrong. What if this is it? They're rubbing away at the already threadbare barrier between this world and some other, unimaginable one. Will translating this book help tear through the final membrane? What will this other world birth into our existence if it does?

Neither Mrs. Bowen nor Mrs. Irving seemed to hear the voice last night. And so far, no one but Whatley-Campbell and his people seem to have noticed the dead who accost me on the streets. They all seem to target me. But this is the first time that one of them was...

I can't think about what it would mean if it was your voice I heard. If the dead are rising, there's no reason it couldn't have been some other lost child. I have no way to know if it was even talking to me—I could have been overhearing some conversation that had nothing to do with me at all. If it was you, then why am I even writing this?

I think the best thing I can do is focus on the book. Today has been dreary and wet, a

typical London day, but too unpleasant to even venture out. I spent part of it in the downstairs sitting room, staring out the window at the rain. I wasn't being idle—I was running over parts of the code in my head, turning it over in my mind's eye like a puzzle box. I could feel I was close to something like a breakthrough. I've spoken in other letters about the delight of solving a code, the feeling of everything falling into place. There is a corollary feeling when you are stymied, a maddening sense of close but far away, like an itch in the center of your back. I was suffering under this sense of almost but not quite, watching the rain stutter through the leaves of the great oak in the garden, when I noticed a man passing by on the pavement beyond the grass.

I noticed him because it was the third time he'd passed. He had walked by, slowly, twenty minutes earlier, heading toward Hyde Park, and then ten minutes later coming back again the other way. But now he was passing a third time, heading toward the park again. A coincidence, perhaps. Maybe he forgot something at home and went back for it. But he slowed each time he passed the house, and he kept his eyes forward in a way that seemed more fixed than casual. He didn't look at the house, or at me in the window, but in a way that seemed purposeful. He was making a show of not looking.

I must add here my conviction that this man was not dead. It says a lot, I suppose, about the events of this spring to say I would not have been bothered at all if this was merely another one of the London dead wandering the streets, drawn to me by whatever compels them. This man was real and alive and definitely casing our house.

Whether he is one of Whateley-Campbell's men, or some other spy I have no way of knowing. But if I were to guess I'd have put money on Whateley-Campbell.

But of course, that wasn't the end of it.

As I say, I assumed it was the mysterious group checking up on me, making sure I was

working on breaking their code. I retreated to my upstairs apartments and opened the book for another go. I spent something like forty-five minutes on one particular passage, one of the red-ink sections that had actual words in it.

I heard the knock at the door, but assumed it was merely a delivery or neighbor until I heard Mrs. Bowen's voice from downstairs. I couldn't make out the words, but she sounded very firm, and while she wasn't quite shouting, she had certainly raised her voice. For Mrs. Bowen, a raised voice was a breach of decorum not to be imagined, so I slipped the book in my jacket pocket and went to the staircase to make sure all was well.

From the top of the stairs I could see Mrs. Bowen's back as she stood at the open door. Just outside the door was a tall man. The watery sunlight backlit him into shadow, but I thought it might be the same man who had been casing the house earlier. As I came out onto the landing, Mrs. Bowen was telling the man he couldn't come in.

"I'm going to call for a constable if you don't let us alone," she said, her voice still raised.

"I promise you I don't mean harm to anyone here," the man said. His voice was low and calm, and somehow more threatening for that. He certainly didn't sound like what he said was true, but I recognized the style of speech at least.

"Is everything all right, Mrs. Bowen?" I called from the top of the stairs. I was aware of the door across the landing opening and Mrs. Irving sticking her head out.

Both Mrs. Bowen and the man at the door looked up at me, and I saw that it was indeed the same man I had seen in pacing the pavement earlier. He was wearing a dark overcoat and a gray felt hat. Under the coat was a gray suit that struck me as studiously nondescript. He looked vaguely familiar to me, but I couldn't place where or why. His eyes locked on me when I spoke,

and he pushed past Mrs. Bowen to step into the foyer.

“Ah! Miss Waters. Just who I was hoping to speak with.”

Mrs. Bowen was furious at this further liberty. “I’m calling a constable,” she said.

“That won’t be necessary, Mrs. Bowen,” I said. Without taking my eyes off the man below me, I said, “Mrs. Irving, would you be so good as to step into my sitting room and bring me the small revolver you’ll find laying on the side table by the sofa?”

Mrs. Irving’s eyes widened, but to the woman’s credit she silently did what I asked. I took the gun from her and slid it into the other pocket of my jacket.

“We can talk on the porch,” I said.

We went onto the porch past the astonished gaze of my elderly protectors, and once the door had closed behind us I turned on him.

“What do you want with me?”

“I merely want to talk, Miss Waters. I have come down from...” he began, but I interrupted him.

“I know where you’re from. What does Bletchley Park want with me? I thought they had made it clear they were done with me.”

If my guessing his masters surprised him, he hid it well. He coolly pulled a cigarette from his inside pocket, making sure I saw his own gun holstered under his arm. He offered the case to me and I shook my head. I kept my hand in my jacket pocket.

He lit the cigarette with a small silver lighter. “I see you are every bit as perceptive as they told me you’d be,” he said.

“We can jump past the flattery,” I said. “Did Sergeant Waverly send you?”

He laughed. “I’m afraid my orders are from a good bit above the good Sergeant’s pay

grade,” he said. “General Montgomery asked me to pay you a visit. He worries that you may not be getting on well.”

“That’s a rather frivolous thing for the general to spend time on. Is the war not keeping him busy?”

“A possibly distraught American woman with knowledge of top secret government operations is surely worth a quick trip to London,” he said. “At any rate, I wouldn’t file it under ‘frivolous.’”

“Now that you’ve seen I’m obviously far from ‘distraught’ I hope you’ll have a happy report for the general. I’m sorry to have wasted your time.”

“I suppose I have,” he said. “I had heard that when you left Bletchley you were, shall we say, less than composed?”

“Well, times change,” I said. “I’m glad to see that,” he said. “You must expect us to check in from time to time. We simply want to ensure the well-being of all our citizens.”

“Like the citizens of Coventry? Or Hawthorne?”

His face hardened, and I realized why he was familiar. He looked like Lon Chaney, Jr. In *The Wolf Man*. The same bulky build, the same loose face and heavy brows. Probably hiding the same savage nature.

“What is this?” he asked suddenly, pointing at the edge of the book sticking out of my pocket. Before I could answer he had leaned forward and slipped it free.

My heart was racing, but I knew enough to maintain a calm exterior. “Please give that back,” I said.

He turned the book over in his hand. I felt a rising panic clutching at my chest. As I struggled to keep my breathing even, I caught a movement in the corner of my eye. I turned my

head slightly and saw three dead people, two men and a woman, standing by the oak tree. The men were World War I soldiers, their bodies riddled with bullet holes. The woman was wearing a dressing gown and had thin red lines across her wrists from which rivulets of blood ran down her hand and dripped from the tips of her fingers. All three had their empty eyes turned to the man on the porch, who was about to open the book.

“I said please give me my property back,” I repeated.

He ignored me and opened the book, squinting at the first page. “Why, Miss Waters. This looks like a code book. Where would you have gotten a code book?” He turned another page.

The dead shuffled their feet. The suicide took a step forward and pointed her bloody finger at the man. I pulled the gun from my pocket and thumbed the hammer back. “If you don’t give me my book,” I said, “I’ll bury you in the back garden.”

There was a tense silent moment, and then the man closed the book and held it out toward me. I took it with my free hand.

“You are making a serious error, Miss Waters,” he said.

“You may tell General Montgomery I’m doing fine,” I said, not lowering the gun. If you need to check in again, feel free to telephone and save yourself the journey.”

He backed down the steps to the yard. The dead parted for him as he passed unknowing through their midst.

At the edge of the garden he spread his arms wide and said, “We are not your enemy, Miss Waters.”

“Well, you’re not my fucking friends,” I said.

He did not speak again, but walked out of the garden and down the street. I stood with the dead and watched him go. When he turned the corner onto the high street, I put the gun away.

My companions faded into smoke.

So that likely shortens my time considerably. I can't imagine I have more than a day or two before there are consequences. I need to break this code as quickly as possible.

I should sign off. Mrs. Bowen and Irving are laying tea, and they are brimming with questions. They have decided I am a spy. I suppose they aren't wrong.

I know it couldn't have been your voice last night. I know you're safe across the ocean. My love flies to you there.

Yours,

Josie

[Theme music; end credits]