

Something heard

The Shoves

Hannah

It had been a long drive at the end of a busy week. Graham had hired an architect-designed cabin for the week-end and the location was perfect. According to the online blurb the property was on the site of a WW2 listening station built out on the marshes not far from Southwold. We explored the fancy kitchen and bathroom and looked in all the cupboards. After that it was a cup of hot chocolate on the wooden deck, and then bed.

I should have slept soundly. I was exhausted. The bed was comfortable enough and it was blissfully quiet – no roar of traffic and no sirens like we get at home. I don't know why I woke, and to be honest, I might have been dreaming, but I definitely heard a sound. Tap, pause, tap tap, pause, tap, ..like something dripping but with more pattern to it. It went on for maybe ten minutes and then stopped. It was just before dawn and not yet light. For some reason I never got back to sleep after that.

.....

Ivy

I loved the solitude of the nights working in the listening station, out on the marshes. It was an easy bike ride just a few miles from home. I put on my headphones and waited quietly.



It was always dark when the messages began. Tap, tap, pause, tap, pause.. I was fast, very fast. The encrypted morse code meant nothing to me but I didn't mind. It was my job. My contribution. I heard the sounds on the radio and transcribed them into text in real time, ready for the morning collection. I did this night after night.

I've maybe told you this before, but since you are listening I'm going to tell you again. It was the middle of May. The messages were coming in thick and fast. Almost too fast to keep up with. I had my head down, focusing on the sounds of the letters and concentrating hard. I was about to add the transcript to the pile when I realized that I'd received an unencrypted message in English.

'Help. I know you are listening. I am out of fuel. I am about to go down in the marshes. Help, please help. Hans'.

I moved the shutter aside just an inch or so and peered out. It was coming dawn and there in the sky I saw the plane.



It was moving erratically and losing height fast. Hans, if that is who it was, was going to crash in the field just behind the marsh. I could not leave my station, not on any account. The radio morse began again, probably another plane. Who knows. But now I was scared. Would Hans survive? Would he kill me? He knew where I was, and he knew what I was doing. After an agonizing wait, I heard a knock on the door – gentle at first and then louder. Tap, tap tap. A pause. Then another tap, TAP, TAP. The door was locked, my bike was inside and the listening station was blacked out. But there was the unmistakable

sound of morse code from the radio. Hans would hear that and he would know it meant. I had a gun kept in the drawer under the table, and he would have one too.

I couldn't turn the radio off – the messages might be critical - I had to keep working, come what may. I waited for Hans to shoot the lock and break down the door but nothing happened. Eventually the messages slowed to a trickle, as they always did when it got light. I waited. An hour went past and then another. At some point I'd have to open the door. When I finally plucked up courage to do so I was greeted by a beautiful early morning sky. There was no sign of Hans, and none of his plane either. Had I been dreaming? I was certain about the tapping on the door. I packed the night's messages into my special box and cycled fast. What should I do? An unencrypted sentence was as rare as gold dust, but what if I'd been asleep on the job? Should I hand Hans' message over to the motorbike courier with all the rest, or should I keep it to myself?

.....

Emma

I drove out to the marshes to clean the cabin. It's not a demanding job and I get to meet new people which is always interesting.

I tapped gently on the door. Tap, pause, tap, tap. Hannah opened the door. 'Hello' I said 'I'm Emma, your cleaner. You must be Hannah'.

'Yes, do come in.' She looked whacked. 'Are you ok?' I asked 'Not everyone likes the silence out here, not after the noisy cities they are used to.'

Hannah yawned. 'I'm fine – but it is true, I didn't sleep that well'.

'Not the tapping again?' I said.

Hannah looked up from her mug of fresh brewed coffee. 'Yes, there was some tapping – what was it? Has someone heard it before?'

I sat down heavily on one of the uncomfortable wire chairs with my box of cleaning products beside me. 'Was it just as it was getting light, and did it go on for a while and then suddenly stop?'

Hannah was pale as a ghost. 'Yes, that's exactly right, how did you know?'

I leaned forward and lowered my voice 'The boss told me to keep this to myself but between you and me, you are not the first to hear him.'

'To hear who? There was no one else, just Graham and me, and Graham was asleep.'

'Hans', I said, 'It would have been Hans tapping. During the war my grandmother worked here at the listening station and she used to talk about the night she heard a German airman calling for help as he was about to die. The funny thing is they never found the plane, nor his body. But she was convinced. She even showed me the morse code she'd transcribed. It was against the rules, but she never sent it in.'

I'll be in trouble if word gets out, promise me you won't tell ..'

Just then Graham popped his head round the door. 'Hannah, I've found the problem. It's the sedum roof. Some of the new gravel has been trickling down and dropping into the gutter. We'll have to contact the owner, but I've managed to fix it for the moment. You should sleep better tomorrow night!'

I eased myself out of the designer chair. 'Well, I must be getting on, no more gossiping with the customers'. I turned to Hannah and put my finger to my lips. She nodded.

... - - - . . . - - - . . . - - - . . . - - - . . . - - - . . . - - - . . .

Hannah

I kept my promise. I haven't told a soul about a dead airman tapping out his last words just before dawn, but I am certain that Emma was right and I am certain that Hans will be back – tap, pause, tap tap, pause, tap.

Archibald and Mary

We four ATS girls (Ivy, Ethel, Marge and me) work in the listening station at Sizewell. From the outside it looks like a normal cattle shed, but it is not. The farmer drives the cows across the mud each morning to disguise our bicycle tracks – and to keep our secret safe from spying planes.

I have been trained in the use of a special piece of equipment, code named Archibald which is kept in the shed. Normally we work shifts, two hours transcribing the morse messages, two hours rest. It is demanding work.

Archibald and I kick into action if there is a raid. When an unidentified aircraft is detected a blue light flashes on Archibald's display. This is my signal. I turn him on full and he spits out the coordinates of the incoming plane. Only Archibald can tell when a plane drops below the radar. Ethel then copies down the coordinates so that HQ can track the plane and Ivy sends these details on by morse. Marge listens in on the two-way radio.

It was a Tuesday night, I'm sure of it. Archibald spotted a plane that appeared to be heading straight to Southwold. We set the coordinate reader going. The plane turned south, and soon we heard the sound of the four engines overhead. There was a huge bang from somewhere near Leiston.

Marge said, it is a mayday, they are going down, I can hear them saying 'Brace, Brace' (but in German).

Seconds later there was another huge crash as the plane plunged into the sea right in front of us. All our equipment went dead. I told the girls we had to stay at our post and that's what we did.

Eventually the troops turned up to see if we were ok. This was top secret, but the rumour was that someone had heard about Archibald and we (and he) were the real targets.

Marge, who was still shaken, piped up. What about the Germans, I heard them talking as the plane went down. Dead, said the commander, dead, all dead. Did you not hear the mines they set off on the beach? Those Germans are nothing but bits for the crabs and gulls. Don't you worry about them. It's a good night for us. Four Germans killed and only our dispatch rider hurt.

Now it was Ethel's turn to go pale. 'Our dispatch rider? You mean Eddie?' Yes, Eddie that's him, he's in Aldeburgh hospital right now. Got hit by a bit of fuselage, but he'll pull through.

The commander turned to me. And you, Mary, we would never have shot down that plane without your help. The coordinates were spot on. Your splendid work with Archibald will be very well received. You are sure to get a medal, mark my words.

Well, Eddie recovered and in the end it was me he took a fancy to, not Ethel. I was billeted at the Garret House and he was just round the corner at Aldeburgh Hospital. I visited him often, and often without anyone knowing. Then disaster struck.

I was sent to North Uist, far away on the Outer Hebrides, in Scotland. There was a special development project devoted to Archibald and I was to be stationed there for who knows how long. Eddie and I were desolate, but he promised to travel North. And so that's what happened. I moved to Scotland and a year or so later, Eddie made the journey to visit. By that time I had grown to love the landscape and the isolation. Unfortunately Eddie could not stand the rain or the midges. He left a day early and although it is hard to admit it even now, I'm glad that was the end of it.

Some time later I was awarded a medal for my pioneering work and I travelled to Edinburgh for the occasion. The Queen's Representative did the honours and it was a great day out.

When I was demobbed I stayed on, I learned Gaelic and I became part of the local community. I took on the job of local postmistress, delivering mail between the islands. I retired when the boats and rough seas were too hard to manage and I decided to return to Suffolk. I managed to buy a small cottage, overlooking Sizewell beach.

Eventually, when even that was too much to manage, I moved back into Garrett House which was now a nursing home. I don't like to brag, but I had become rather famous for my work with Archibald, and I was a bit of a star for the local British Legion.

When I died there was a big ceremony on the beach, and a gun salute. The sound boomed across the countryside, just as it had done in the war.