

The Great Wen

My ear catches the harsh sound of an object being pulled across the office floorboards. The tensivity of the room thick in the air, forcing me to suck in a brief breath. “Helena Smith.” A familiar voice sounds from where the floorboards were briefly abused. “The German’s bombings on The Great Wen have been going on for a millennium now.” The voice continues. I turn towards the voice, Lance Cone. Sitting on an old wooden chair in the centre of the room. If the screeching of the chair on the floorboards didn’t get the whole office’s attention, the mention of Germans sure did.

Mr Cone has been my boss for the previous few years. He’d vouched for my spot as the sole female journalist in the company during a mass culling of employees when profits plunged as inflation rose the past couple years. A war is one thing I can’t be bothered about when my job is on the line, being paid so little is better than being paid none.

Sensing his eyes looking for a response I breathe out the tension in my shoulders, “Indeed Mr Cone, the blitz in the city is apparently quite horrid.”

Cone grins, rising from his pedestal in the centre of the room. He raises his hands in speech. A man born for theatre dare I say. “Those shelter hermits need a light in their tunnel of debris. You’re being promoted, dear. To groundwork.”

Attempting to wrap my mind around the mess of a sentence I just heard, I reply almost on instinct, “Excuse me?” Despite my words coming out harsher than intended, the words not even being intended in the first place. Cone doesn’t falter continuing, “A pretty, hardworking woman like yourself deserves more recognition. The company has paid for your fair. We need a smashing article, to get papers flying off the shelf at a penny per issue. We want you to butter those hermits up with your face and feminine appeal. The life of a housewife in modern London, bombs dare stop her from tending to her family! We need to sell. Those radio jockeys are insufferable to our profits, darl.”

I hold a complaint in my throat. With so little rights in this company; if this is the one thing only I am able to provide to my work, so be it.

05:00. MAY 8th .1941

Mr Cone, my directorial chief has assigned me to report on the condition of the city from the perspective of a London housewife for the daily paper. I am honoured to have been given this task and hope the company will maintain its generosity towards me in the future with my continued employment.

I let out a shaky breath, alongside dropping my ink pen back into its case. A sharp noise pierces my ears. I feel the floor rattle underneath me as the steam train departs the station.

“Good evening, Sir Gray. My name is Helena Smith the one you’ve been informed would be coming. I just have a few questions if you would care.” I look up to the conductor, his smile doesn’t meet his eyes as he keeps his body turned towards the track. He coughs out, “So, you’s the writer jockey?”

I suck in through my teeth, straining to keep my composure. “Sir, as a conductor how do you feel about going to and from the blitz? Surely, all the German bombings scare you. Aren’t you worried about the sanctity of the track?”

Gray snatches a quick glance before looking back at the track. “As long as the missus is home and fed, I’m content to work for the man until those Nazi’s get a taste of their own medicine.” A soft smile leaks into his eyes as he breaks his staring contest with the track. Looking towards me completely for the first time, he gestures softly towards the window. Distraction heavy in his eyes as he focuses on me, still pointing outside. If you look just up, you can see Big Benny. Been hoping to bring my wife here before her oven explodes.”

He lets out a soft chuckle, slowly turning back to his beloved track. As my mind musters up a banter in reply, Gray’s eyes widen, finally meeting fully with the outside world.

Then everything goes white. “BRACE!”

I open my eyes, a soft ring in my ears consistent.

“My, Ms Smith, you got out rather unharmed! Biet a little shaken haha! Welcome to The Great Wen. Many a’workers ere thought we outta rename, eh? Seems not harsh enough. ’The Hellish Wen’ more’a like!”

I sit up, my back cracking. God have mercy on the sir that wakes up to such a scratching voice each morning. My eyes take a moment to focus, the voice akin to nails on the chalkboard quickly gets a face to the name. Soft round cheeks on either side of her face, she’d be a catch for any man had it not been for that god awful voice. A sweet nurse’s outfit on, ahh I’m in a hospital.

“Shame what happened to the conductor, no? Poor bloke was hardly recognisable. Well, I guess getting boiled to death does that to yah aha!” I reply absentmindedly, “...Mnn..”

And then it hits me, dear god it hits me. Forgive my blasphemy but for a woman who yaps so intently she never gives a detail! What happened to the conductor now? Had he died? Such a stoic man with such a wholesome heart. Was I not just talking to the man? Had he not wanted to take his wife to London?

“Oh, deary! I nearly forgot- ere’s ya bag! Them workers found it for ya! Saw you’re headin’ to the inn tonight! Make sure to watch yourself, them Nazi’s get real uppity once the curtain drops.”

My brain unable to catch up with what on earth has just happened, I take my bag from the yapper. A nod, the only response I can force.

A bell dings as I limp into the inn Mr Cone had so gracefully paid for. The one thing I can be grateful for in this trip, it’s not coming out of my pocket.

A yell reaches across the inn along with footsteps. A small man scampers into eye view, “Ah! Welcome dearest, you from the paper?” Despite his clearly aging body the man seems to be full of energy.

My voice croaky I whisper, “I believe I have a room here?”

The owner nods. Seemingly picking up that I am not in the mood, nor vocally able to chit-chat at the moment, “Indeed! Just up the stairs, first room- 012.”

22:50. MAY 10th .1941

Entering London, Train inflamed in an explosion. Previous Interviewee Mr. Harold Gray pronounced dead at the medical station.... He was looking forward to bringing his wife and their unborn child to the city.

I have been greeted by fire and death upon entering The Great Wen. A nurse even going so far to call it ‘The Hellish Wen’.

I am not living the life of a housewife, I am merely a person, afraid.

I close my eyes, turning my head upwards towards the ceiling. I sit at my desk, ink on my page still wet. My throat sputters as I swallow back nothing. My closed eyes not being strong enough to hold back the current of emotions anymore, I bring my arm to my face. Covering my eyes, a grimace leaks from my exposed lips. Trembling silently alone in my room. Is this the life of a housewife?

Helena feels heat on her skin, her eyes snap open. The moisture a few seconds ago so rich in them, having evaporated immediately. The ringing in her ears is back and more painful than ever.

She rushes out of her room. Her eyes widening as yelling begins to register in her ears. Fire envelopes the end of the hall. A hole gaping out of the side of the inn. Helena is planted firmly in place. Her eyes reflect embers as she looks upon the city. Aflame.

Suddenly, her feet are ripped from the ground. Helena's eyes trace the arm pulling her away from the bite in the building. The old inn keeper is shouting incoherently in her ears. Yet all she can make out are mumbles.

Her lungs burn, barely able to get her voice out. She rips her arm away from the man. Bolting off in the opposite direction. Her throat hoarse as she breathes heavily into the night.

Looking up, Helena saw planes upon planes. British and German alike. Some were falling to the ground before her. Some were in turn dropping bombs and shrapnel upon the city.

Helena looks away from the carnage in the sky to the worse fate in front of her. Her eyes sting. Before her she saw a woman screaming, a single limb the size of a ruler in her arms.

A man screeches, rolling on the floor next to the woman. His clothes ignited. A child runs into the woman, gripping her clothes covered in soot. The boy, only the size of a large dog sobs incoherently for his mother.

As Helena stands upon the mess. A frown twists on her lips forming an almost smile. This is not the life of a housewife. This is not the life of a woman. This is the life of a journalist. The life she's dreamed of. It's bright, and hot, and she finally feels alive.