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Life Stories Sample

The Red Telephone Box

Charing, Kent, 1937

On her first day she ran past the red telephone box that was planted firmly in front of the telephone exchange and stopped for a moment. At the age of 15 Isla had left school. Now at 16 and still full of the playful exuberance of youth she was excited to start her first day at work. Having stopped beside the red telephone box for a moment she looked at the building where she was to start work and caught her breath. She had run all the way through the village from her home on the outskirts here to the Centre where the roads crossed and where the lines of the telegraph fed into the GPO building.

She walked in.

Every morning since she would stop for a moment at the red box and look up at the simple red bricked building before stepping inside to begin her day of work. After a year of filing and general office work, she was given the exciting news that she was to begin training to be an exchange operator.

She found herself on a train to London, a trip she had only ever taken twice before in her now nearly 17 years of life, with her parents on day trips to stand outside Buckingham Palace and visit

the galleries around Trafalgar Square. Now she found herself in Faraday House, nestled between St Paul's Cathedral and the River Thames. As she looked out the window at the passing sail barges moving goods up and down the teaming river, a lady at the front of the classroom spent the day drilling the girls on correct annunciation and operation of the Switchboard equipment.

Her first day on the switchboard came soon after her London trip and she paused again at the red box before walking inside the exchange building and sitting down at the switchboard desk, tentatively she put on her earpiece.

Looming up above her was an array of sockets and indicators. Even though she had spent the day in London learning how this all worked it was still a daunting moment when the bell rang and the indicator at the top of one of the lines of sockets rolled over to show its white side like a doll's eyes slowly opening. She reached up and connected her Horn shaped microphone. The line clicked in her ear and she spoke into the bakelite horn. "How may I connect you?". She recognized the voice of the Vicars wife asking for a local connection and she quickly plugged the connectors into the relevant sockets and, once the other caller had answered, she connected both parties with a polite and beautifully pronounced "connecting you now".

So, it continued, like this and with increasing regularity. As well as transferring calls she also, on occasion took calls from other exchanges to dictate telegrams and pass them to the post master for delivery. These little glimpses into the village life around her were of course highly confidential and she felt as if she were at the centre of the village life, but she kept her counsel and respected the importance of confidentiality.

One morning she approached the red telephone box as always to see it was in use. The young man inside was struggling to get his call connected and so she politely tapped on the window. He looked up at her with a feint look of frustration and she smiled kindly and

indicated to him which button to push. His face changed to smile and he gave her a thumbs up sign through the small glass panel and started his brief call.

She stood for a little longer than usual, but a sufficient distance away from the box so as not to be considered eavesdropping. A few moments later and the door swung open. The young man emerged and thanked her for her help, he introduced himself as Harry Sutton. He wasn't from the village she observed, and he explained that he was cycling through to the coast from Maidstone and wanted to check the train times for his return and she had been very helpful. She would be late for work she added pointing to the exchange, and he thanked her again and asked her name as he mounted his bike. She told him and waved him off on his journey.

The next week on the same day she was surprised to see his bike leaning against the phone box as she approached that morning and he greeted her as she drew closer and offered her a small bouquet of flowers. She smiled and said thank you and he explained that he had admonished himself for being in such a hurry last week that he thought he hadn't thanked her properly. She told him to think nothing of it but he insisted and furthermore he would like to take her to lunch at the local pub that day if she were agreeable. She was.

A year later the village church was the location of their wedding and they stood in the churchyard in the glorious July Sun afterwards. Harry moved in with her mum and dad and Isla continued her work while Harry looked for work as a farm hand in the nearby area. In September though their plans were interrupted by the declaration of war.

Harry was insistent that he should enlist in the army immediately and Isla did not try to convince him otherwise despite desperately wanting to, she knew that he felt that it was his duty. In October that year They both stood at the telephone box on a breezy Saturday morning as they waited for Harry to be collected by the Bus to take him to Maidstone Barracks. The conversation was thin

as other young men milled around them, but she asked him plainly to make sure he came home safe and he promised her that he would and that she was not to worry. As the bus pulled away, she was left alone at the phone box wondering how she was supposed to not worry when the man she loved was being taken away from her to war.

Every morning she would stop at the telephone box but it was now for a slightly different reason. Isla would now look toward the road where the bus took her Harry away.

As the year rolled into the next Isla was relieved to hear the news reports that the war seemed not to have begun in earnest. Harry would send her letters telling her of his travels within the bounds of secrecy that he was under. She could tell though from his notes that he had shipped out to Europe as part of the British Expeditionary force and she would travel into Ashford to watch the Pathe news at the cinema and could see “tommy’s” boarding ships to France, Belgium and Holland, she would scan the images for a hint of Harry’s face amongst the smiling soldiers, to no avail.

In May news began to come through of a major offensive and Isla found herself reading news reports and scanning the maps they showed even though she had no idea where her Harry was.

The bell on the switchboard rang one day in the middle of May that year and she took the call, the voice on the other end of the line was brusque and direct *“Telegram for Mrs Wray of Glebe Cottage... The Air Ministry regrets to announce that your son LAC William Wray has been killed in action. [STOP] Letter to follow [STOP]”*.

Isla wrote the words down then swivelled her chair to the typewriter, took the telegram paper from the draw and typed up the message. As she folded it into the envelope and dropped into the telegram basket for the postmen to collect, she shivered a little before returning to her switchboard position. Minutes later

another arrived and then another. Three men lost in a matter of less than half an hour. The phoney war had ended she concluded.

The news reports on the wireless began to tell of a the German counter attack and advance and the BEF retreating to the Belgian coast. Whilst Westminster politicians made speeches Isla took more and more telegrams each time feeling so sad for the families that she was typing out the words for them to read.

It was the Tuesday the 4th June, Isla remembered that date for ever after. The Switchboard bell rang and as usual she answered to hear the monotone of the War office official on the other end.

“Telegram please operator” he announced; Isla replied her usual response in her trained operators voice “Go ahead please” she rested her pencil on her pad as she awaited the now well practiced process.

The voice on the other end continued “To Mrs Isla Sutton”

The pencil broke as she felt her hand convulse as she heard her own name. Her mind raced and she felt her forehead suddenly fell stone cold.

“Hello...operator...hello...are we connected?” Spluttered the voice.

Isla cleared her now dry throat and was able to reply for them to continue she knew the words that came next, she had typed them out many times this past couple of weeks, regret to inform...Harry Sutton...missing in action...presumed dead.

She sat in total shock for a moment. She removed the headset and moved to the typewriter but didn’t take out a sheet of paper to load into the carriage. She just sat there. The exchange bell rang and her colleague eventually answered as Isla didn’t respond. When she looked back to where Isla was sitting before the call came in to see the chair empty, the note still sitting beside it. She stood up to look

out the window and saw Isla walking past the red phone box. She read the note and sighed and turned back to the switchboard and put the headset back on.

Over the next few weeks Isla felt like she was walking about in a trance. She hadn't broken down. Her family had comforted her and she was didn't take time off work, passing the red phone box but not stopping as she usually did. Instead she hurried past it. She worked all the shifts she could and tried to not think about Harry by keeping herself busy.

When news of the bombing in London started to come through she would work late at the exchange to let people make calls to friends and relatives to check they were safe. The very real threat of a successful German invasion meant that there was always something going on to keep her busy and active. The evenings were the worst for her. With the curtains pulled tightly as part of the blackout and little to do other than listening to the radio or reading she would find her mind wandering into thoughts of the life that had been taken away from her. She would imagine a little home in the village and the coming of children. None of this was real but it was a life that she nonetheless mourned and shed many quiet and silent tears over, but most of all she felt the sheer absence of her Harry, that cheeky boy in the phone box.

As the war continued on, she never received any further detail of Harry's loss. When the United States of America joined the war in 1942 the momentum slowly began to turn in the favour of the allies and troops were billeted all over the Kent countryside, partly in order to keep them hidden from prying German aerial reconnaissance.

Her friends tried to encourage her to get out and try to enjoy herself more and she would try. There was a dance held in the village hall one night and the local girls were very excited to discover a US Army Troop lorry parked outside as they arrived.

The Yanks were very different to local lads and were certainly well equipped with cigarettes and money, but Isla wasn't looking for a new dance partner. Harry was still out there somewhere, and she just didn't feel it was right. Her only hope was that they could win the war and she could find out exactly what had happened to her love.

In May 1944 the troops were gone and there was talk of a major mobilisation which became apparent in early June when the D Day Landings were announced in the papers and the news.

The telegrams increased in numbers and each and every time she dictated one Isla relived her own shudder of pain but still she did her duty and typed them up immediately for the postmen to deliver. The families started calling them the Angels of Death as they feared the arrival of such a telegram but Isla knew they were doing their very best for the war effort.

News of the liberation of Paris and then of Berlin was followed by the welcome news of the death of Hitler in his bunker in Berlin. Victory was close and the Prime Minister, Mr Churchill announced that they were expecting the surrender of Germany and the 8th May would be declared as Victory in Europe Day. Parties were swiftly planned but Isla didn't feel like celebrating and she arranged to provide cover at the exchange whilst the rest of the staff put up bunting and made sandwiches down at the village hall.

Isla sat alone at her switchboard desk as the festivities began when confirmation of the surrender was broadcast over the wireless. She tried not to feel sad at the news crackling over the airwaves and music could be heard through the open window from down the road as the party at the village hall started to really swing into action.

The bell on the switchboard rang and Isla swung round on her chair and flicked the switch to answer the call, she noted that it was coming in from the Phone Box outside. She answered with a

slightly shaky yet still beautifully pronounced “operator, how may I direct your call?”

A man's voice came over the wire “I'd like to speak to Mrs Isla Sutton Please? Said the voice. Isla adjusted her ear piece, “This is she” She replied pushing the earpiece hard against her ear to improve the quality. “Hello Love, I promised you I'd come home safe” Said Harry.

The ear piece clattered to the side of the switchboard, suddenly the exchange was unattended.

Outside the exchange building, where the roads crossed and the telegraph lines converged, Isla flung open the door of the red telephone box and wrapped her arms around her husband.