

'The Eyes of other People are the Eyes that ruin us. If all but myself were blind, I should want neither fine Clothes, fine Houses nor Fine Furniture.' Letter to Benjamin Vaughan, 1784.

'CELESTE'

The hour was late and Jodie was alone in the office. Even the cleaners had been gone an hour, maybe longer. She couldn't say with any certainty. Rain peppered the window beside her, which would have been completely dark if not for the reflection of her desk lamp and the spotlights above. She slumped back in her chair, throwing her glasses on the desk with a clatter. Her eyes felt heavy, but even so she found it near impossible to look away from the photograph she'd been given earlier that day.

'I know you've been waiting for this,' her boss had said, an eyebrow arched. 'But don't let it keep you up all night – I know what you're like. Two days and no more. Write the god-damn article and be done with it. There are other stories out there.' With that, he tossed the jiffy bag on her desk and strode away.

She knew there were other stories out there, of course she did, there always were; but this was a story she couldn't drop. Her colleagues found her odd, obsessive, and she accepted it. That was what gave her her edge as a journalist.

The photograph was damning evidence, even she would admit it. It had made her mouth dry to see it, the sounds of the office around her turning into an underwater echo chamber. Her colleagues swam in aimless circles, talked aimless talk. She barely saw them, let alone heard any conversation. The photograph held her completely, in spite of her having seen it in fuzzy newsprint every day for the last month. Holding the original in her hands felt different. However damning it may appear, the more she looked, the more she wondered.

The photograph had been taken just over sixty years ago, at a party in high society Berlin. In it, a young woman hovered at the fringes, half turned away from the lens. Even so, you could see the laugh flitting across her mouth as she leant close to a man standing on her right. A man whose arm bore a swastika.

Her stomach felt hollow, gnawed out. It had only grown worse throughout the day, leaving her feeling slightly sick. Now, she rose a little unsteadily to her feet and crossed to the window. It was cool to the touch. She could still see the ghost of her handprint on the glass when she looked back from the office door a minute or so later, before flicking the last of the spotlights off and casting the office into midnight gloom.

The Special Operations Executive had known the woman simply as ‘Celeste’ and had valued her as one of their greatest agents. She had successfully infiltrated German communications and led some of the most daring sabotages during the war. There were no records, however, of her infiltrating so close to the nerve of the Nazi party, in the midst of so many generals. But the news was rife with rumours that Celeste had in fact been a double agent for the Germans – following the unearthing of a particularly incriminating photograph.

Jodie leant against Millennium Bridge, looking down at a lone riverboat cruising quietly along. The rain had died down, leaving just a fine mist in the air that made the lights beneath St Paul’s wink and glimmer. It was close to twelve. She would be back at the office in just eight hours’ time, but the thought of going home to sleep was unimaginable with all the noise in her head. Ever since the first murmurs of Celeste’s questionable allegiances, Jodie had remained unmoved in her opinion; but today had shaken her more than she’d expected. The deadline for her article was just two days away – she’d already begged for more time, until she had the physical photo in her hands and with it, the proof it had not been doctored – and still she had no idea how to proceed.

A single tear slipped down the side of her nose. How must it feel to have your reputation destroyed, your name on the lips of those who believe you to have deceived them and the country at large? Celeste had been dead nineteen years, so it wasn’t as though she would ever find out; but Jodie felt it, or at least a whisper of what she thought it must be like. The horror of it hummed in her very veins, pushing to get out, to press the truth on anyone who would listen. But who would listen? History was always written at the hands of others: the victorious, the many, both. If in the eyes of the world you were a villain, then that is what you were. It was the eyes of others that ruined a person, completely and mercilessly, more so than any physical weapon. But a feeling that could only be described as atavistic, deep-rooted in her chest, told her that Celeste

was not a traitor. There must be an explanation for it, one she would endeavour to find: a missing record, maybe, a last minute direction from the SOE to infiltrate deeper. Jodie hoped that it wasn't so black and white as Celeste being a double agent. She had been her grandmother, after all.

As though it had happened just yesterday, she saw Celeste standing in the kitchen of her childhood: a tea towel over her shoulder, head thrown back with deep-belly laughter at the cake they'd attempted to bake, black, burnt and smoking on the sideboard. She saw her at her primary school performances, never having missed a single one; at birthdays, Christmases, New Year celebrations; in among the shelves of their favourite bookshop they'd visited every weekend. She felt those warm arms around her, smelt her delicate perfume.

Jodie closed her eyes. Her grandmother hardly ever spoke about the war. She said she'd known too many lost and didn't wish to dwell if she could help it; that as fortunate as she was to make it home when so many had not, her life had really begun as the shadows of war lengthened with time. Even so, Jodie cast her mind back, trying to remember any fleeting details she might have mentioned, that might point her in the right direction now. Her head ached with the effort of it. In the morning she would trawl through the SOE archives once more, she decided, searching for a high-risk mission that a young woman known as Celeste might have been sent on. A fool's deluded wish, perhaps, when she'd already looked half a dozen times.

From the moment the photo was first printed, the nation had ripped Celeste to shreds, declared her good name ruined. It was incredible how quickly the eyes of others could turn, tarnishing a person's individuality.

There were still many eyes on Celeste, and the truth of it was, Jodie didn't know how to save her.