

The Letter in the Wall

Name: _____

Read the passage all the way through before you start.

When they pulled the plaster off the back bedroom wall, there was a tin behind it, and inside the tin was a letter dated March 1943.

It was written to somebody called Elsie by somebody who signed only with the letter J. It was not a love letter. It was mostly about a dog, and about how the coal was lasting, and about a neighbour who had started keeping hens in a bathtub. Near the end there was one line that was different from all the rest: *If you are reading this then I did not come back, and you are not to make a sad business of it.*

Mum wanted to know who J was. Dad said the house had changed hands four times and they would never find out. My grandmother, who was ninety-one and had grown up two streets over, put on her glasses and read it twice and said, quite calmly, that the handwriting was a woman's.

That changed everything we had assumed. We had all pictured a soldier. We had built the whole story out of the date at the top and nothing else.

We never did find J. The letter is framed now, in the hall by the door, and people who visit stop and read it and then ask the same question everybody asks, and we say we do not know, and they always look slightly disappointed.

I am not disappointed. I like that somebody put a tin in a wall and it waited eighty years to be wrong about.

Historical fiction · 257 words

Before you turn over

1. Underline any word you are not sure of. Work out what you can from the sentence around it.

2. In one sentence, what is this passage about?

3. Write down one question you still have.

The questions are on the next page. →

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Answer in complete sentences. Look back at the passage as often as you need to.

1. What did the family find, and where?

2. Why is the grandmother's comment the turning point of the story?

3. What does the narrator mean by "we had built the whole story out of the date at the top and nothing else"?

4. Why do visitors look disappointed, and why is the narrator not?

5. Choose one detail from the letter itself and explain what it tells you about 1943.

The Letter in the Wall — Answer Key

1. A tin behind the plaster of a back bedroom wall, holding a letter dated March 1943. *(Recall)*
2. The family had assumed J was a soldier. If the handwriting is a woman's, the story they had built from the date alone falls apart. *(Cause and effect)*
3. Answers will vary. They filled in everything they did not know with assumptions, using one fact — wartime — to invent the rest. *(Inference)*
4. Visitors want the mystery solved. The narrator values the letter as it is — evidence of a real person, and a reminder of how easily we assume. *(Character)*
5. Answers will vary. The coal lasting suggests rationing and cold; hens in a bathtub suggests food shortages and improvising; not making "a sad business" of a death suggests how loss was expected and spoken about. *(Inference)*