

The
German
Ward

PIP WILLIAMS

Three

The morning reveille had sounded and the sun rose over Étaples. Shadows stretched from huts and tents, and Isolation Road was already busy with vehicles and footfall. It was the end of my first week on the German ward and Iso had a couple of hours before her own work began. She was carrying her sketchbook and pastels and her little folding stool and I wondered if she planned to sit outside the German ward to capture its details.

As we approached, I tried to see it from her perspective. It was just one of many long hospital huts and from the outside there was nothing to distinguish it. I told her it was the same as any other ward, but she disagreed. The details, she told me, would be different.

She reminded me of Helen, and thinking of Helen reminded me of the journal.

All these years later I still think of Helen. She is a ghost but not a haunting. She asked me to stay but knew that I wouldn't. Our love was incompatible with our situations and I wonder now if knowing love was barely possible made it more intense – with her, then, later, with him.

Would I have loved either of them so much if I'd been allowed to?

The journal is in the Red Cross box, beneath all the other reminders. I lift it out like it's an antique, fragile and precious. The leather is worn soft from handling and it looks like something that has gone to war – it is scarred and the endpapers have come unstuck.

I remember the day Helen gave it to me.

Her girls were asleep and we were sitting in the bow of their narrowboat on the Oxford Canal. It had been a short visit and I wanted to stay longer, but I never told Helen that. She pushed the journal into my hand. It was leather-bound and it could have sat neatly among the Greek classics she kept in the small shelf of books by her armchair. I stroked it and turned it over. The leather was navy blue, like their narrowboat, and unadorned. I knew she had bound it, that the leather was scrap from the press where she worked. I opened the cover and felt the thickness of the paper. I imagined her folding it and trimming it. The edges were rough – she'd cut them by hand. There was an inscription.

Tilda

Remember the details

Helen x

I'll remember what's important, I'd told her, I don't need to write it down. But she'd known better. We don't always know what will be important until long after it has happened, and then we wish we'd recorded every detail,' she'd said. She knew she was dying, but I did not. She didn't tell me or her girls until it couldn't be denied, and then there was no time to write down the details and nothing good I wanted to recall. Though that isn't true. There were exquisite moments every day, but I couldn't see them at the time. When she was gone I struggled to even remember the colour of her eyes. Brown, I'd say now, if anyone asked. They were more than that but I

can't say how and it kills me.

When I packed for Étapes I included the journal. But those first months were overwhelming and the details were unfamiliar – I had no words for them, and the journal remained blank. It wasn't until the German ward that I began to record them. It was Iso who encouraged it.

I made lists at first, all the ways the German ward was unique (fewer supplies, colder food, a lack of visitors, the sound of Germans talking), and all the ways it was the same (the injuries, the illnesses, the rounds, the sound of men moaning and dying). Then I began to record other details, things that followed me from the ward to my hut and played on my mind until I'd pinned them to the page.

I fan through the journal now and a third of its pages are blank. I knew they would be: when it was all over, there seemed little point to my record keeping and I put the journal down. I didn't want to remember, so it stayed closed for two decades.

But now, his letter. It is unopened, but memories, once stirred, are hard to settle.

I turn to the first page of the journal and there he is, among the lists. *Day 1: I saw a German on his knees. A doctor, it turns out, with no words to spare.* No more than that sentence, because how could I have known?

I turn to the next page and a week has passed. *Matron discussed the rules.* That's all I've written, but I remember Iso walking with me. I remember she said something about painting it. When she offered to come in I might have discouraged her. I remember she headed back the way we had come. Her day would be spent at the Anzac camp, where Gordon Hut was being prepared to welcome a new batch of recruits.

As I write this, I realise my memories of Iso are composites, fragments that have been placed where I think they fit. She existed

in that place like a wallflower and during that time was always on the edge of my vision. Too rarely did I focus on her – it is just one of my many regrets. But I will not take all the blame. It was Iso's nature to observe and mine to be admired; if she comes across as an impression that is part of the reason.

The truth is, she may not have accompanied me to the German ward that day and I am just placing her there because it is convenient. But it is not a lie. She would have been there the next day or the day after that. It eventually became her habit to walk with me to the ward, to come in when she had the time or visit when there was a break in her day. Some details were so ubiquitous I never wrote them down and can't hope to distinguish them, but do I need to? The story remains the same regardless of where I place this detail or that.

My shift was a few hours in when Matron arrived.

'You're getting on, I hear. You have the guts for it.'

'I stopped retching months ago, if that's what you mean.'

'It wasn't what I meant, but I'm glad to hear it.'

She sat at the nurses' desk, patient notes in front of her. She'd made a pot of tea and considered it brewed. She poured it weak and passed me a cup. I was standing and she didn't suggest I sit.

'Sister says the Hun don't bother you.'

Hun, I thought. It did not suit the men in those beds; it certainly did not suit the many boys. If they were crazed it was with pain, not hatred. And yet I'd been unnerved just that morning when one grabbed my wrist and shouted. But did he shout? His words were incomprehensible and to me sounded harsh. I'd heard them one way when he might have meant them another. He saw my panic and let me go, turned his head away. I had been on the German ward for a week and could not relax. Pretending to was exhausting.

‘What is there to be bothered about?’ I said. ‘They’re helpless.’

‘Not all of them, and before they came here ...’

‘I think I can handle them, whoever they were before they came here. Whatever they’ve done.’

My assurance suited her and I realised there were few others who would willingly take my place. She added half a spoon of sugar to her tea and stirred. When she did not offer me the bowl I reached across the desk and helped myself.

She leaned back in her chair and considered me. ‘You were one of Pankhurst’s women, weren’t you?’

‘I might sit, if that’s alright with you, Matron.’

She sipped her tea. ‘Of course.’

I took a chair from beside one of the beds and sat down opposite her. I sipped my own tea. Dishwater. Disappointing. I didn’t let it show.

‘A loyal foot soldier of the Women’s Social and Political Union, for the most part,’ I said.

‘For the most part?’

‘We had a disagreement.’

‘About?’

‘Feathers.’

‘And before this disagreement, what did you do?’

‘Are you asking if I broke any rules?’

She just looked at me, nothing changing in her demeanour. I would come to recognise it as a strategy, her way of creating space for you to incriminate yourself. But at the beginning, I was unaware.

‘I broke rules,’ I said. ‘But mostly I was a mouthpiece for the cause.’

‘You have a talent for it, I hear.’

‘Breaking rules or making speeches?’

She did not clarify.

‘Have you found this life difficult?’ she asked.

‘I’m no debutante.’

‘I’m not talking about chapped hands and the occasional cold shower.’

‘What then?’

‘The rules, Nurse Taylor.’

What to tell this woman? She was different from others I’d known in authority. Despite her uncompromising manner, she didn’t want blind obedience or ironed collars, she wanted honesty. She wanted to know what she had to work with so she could make the most of it. An opportunist, I thought, so I told her the truth.

‘Most are easy enough to follow.’

She waited.

‘Others are easy enough to get around.’

It was hard to tell if she disapproved.

‘Without the rules, Nurse Taylor, we are lost. Following those that seem inconsequential conditions us to follow those that matter.’

I thought about the box of supplies she’d pilfered from 24 General; there were always exceptions. ‘And what kind of rules matter, would you say?’

‘Rules that guide decisions about life and death, right and wrong.’

‘I would have thought I could rely on my conscience in such cases.’

‘That is where you are wrong, Nurse Taylor. In a hospital ward, as in war, our sense of right and wrong can become confused, and a clear conscience can undermine the greater good. Some rules are there to protect us from ourselves.’

‘Have you ever wanted to break a rule that mattered?’ I asked her.

Her eyebrows arched. ‘It is not for you to ask the questions, nurse. This is not a conversation.’

‘Of course you have,’ I said. ‘We all have.’

She didn’t respond. She just took another sip of her tea and watched me.

‘I wonder if you broke it,’ I mused, sipping my own.

She put her teacup on the tray.

‘And I wonder if you have regrets?’ I continued.

‘Regrets?’

‘About the rule you may or may not have broken.’

She took a deep breath. ‘There are always consequences, nurse, no matter how you proceed.’

‘That isn’t an answer.’

‘This isn’t a conversation.’

I was dismissed back to my duties. When she left the ward an hour later I was hunched over a man’s thigh with a magnifying glass and tweezers, removing tiny bits of shrapnel and fabric from a wound. I felt her heavy tread on the boards and expected her to pause, but she did not bother with the pleasantry of a goodbye. She blurred past, then the ward doors opened and closed behind her. I heard an exchange of voices just outside – Matron’s rang like a bell. ‘By all means,’ I heard her say, and the ward doors opened again.

The visitor didn’t announce herself and I didn’t look up from my work or turn towards the doors, but I knew it was Iso. I could smell her. She used rosewater lotion for almost everything – hair, face, chapped hands. She had no idea of the gift she brought whenever she walked onto a ward.

I guessed she had stepped out of the way of things and was holding her small sketchpad on her left forearm with fingers curled over the top of the page, like a clamp on an easel. I continued with my work so she could make her sketch – her study, as she would call it. A gesture, nothing more. It is easier, she once told me, when her subject is oblivious to her gaze. It is preferable, if she is to capture the truth of something.

So I pretended I was oblivious. But I was vain, I still am, despite the sag and the grey. If I knew Iso was observing me I would stand taller or bend with more grace. I’d push my tongue to the roof of my mouth to tighten the softness below my jaw. I knew how to make it look natural and I wanted the lines she drew to flatter me. I would have hated her

to capture the entire truth; no one wants that.

Removing shrapnel and fabric from a wound was a frequent task and I remember the ache in my back those first weeks in Étaples, the agony of it and the shame of feeling it among all those broken bodies. By the time I was on the German ward I'd learned to ignore it. I could have kept going for another ten minutes, another twenty, but Iso was waiting, I knew, for something more distinct than my hunched back.

I put down the magnifying glass and dropped a piece of metal into the kidney dish. It gave a little tinkle. Then I stood and stretched. Hands in the small of my back, chest out, neck extended. My head tilted back and my eyes closed. A performance, perhaps, but I knew it was doing me good. I moved my head from one side to the other. I rolled my shoulders and shook out my arms. Then I sat back down beside the bed. I took up the magnifying glass and the tweezers and I returned to the mess of metal and fabric that had implanted in the man's upper thigh.

When Iso put her hand on my shoulder, I acted surprised.

Four

Iso was right, of course. The details of the German ward were different and its character was unique.

The patients would talk and sometimes move around, as in any ward, but the talk was in German and movement was discouraged if it wasn't part of the treatment. Some sisters forbade it, regardless.

It was on the matron's watch that the ward felt most relaxed. She let patients who were mobile sit on the beds of others to chat or play cards or help with writing or reading letters. I realise now that she wasn't scared of them the way others might have been. The way I was at the beginning.

The sun had risen and the day was already warm when I arrived for my shift. I held the door for two orderlies coming out of the ward with a stretcher between them, a sheet over a body, or most of one. Matron Livingstone was at the nurses' desk, documenting the deceased, I assumed. I walked the length of the ward and stood in front of her.

'No sister this morning?' I asked.

'Clearly,' she said, not looking up from the notes she was writing.

I looked towards the storeroom. There was no sign of Dr Henning and the surgery beyond was quiet.

'My patient notes are meticulous,' she said, pushing the ledger

towards me then rising from her chair. 'Read them carefully and don't be sloppy with your own. As soon as I've given these' – she picked up a kidney dish with several syringes, needles attached, and ampoules of morphia – 'I'm going.'

'Where?'

'To bed, I've been here all night. You'll be on your own for a while.'

'And if there's a problem?' I tried not to sound anxious.

'The head in bed nine and the abdomen in twenty-two are critical. Either they will die or they will not. If one dies, note the time and clean up the obvious then pull the screens around.'

'And just leave them there?'

'Tell an orderly when they come round for the waste, they'll organise the laying out.' She looked at her notes. 'The rest are stable and there should be no problems. If there are, you can try next door.' She gestured in the direction of 24 General. 'But they won't thank you.'

'And how long will I be on my own?'

Did I care that one of them would die on my watch? I hope I did, but that is not the fear that my body recalls. The matron was leaving and all I could think was that one of the Germans might jump from his bed and hold his hands to my throat and none of the others would stop him. It had happened, the hands on my throat. But the boy had been British and other British boys had convinced him I was not the enemy. Those with two legs rose from their beds, those with arms pulled him off. One spoke gently into his ear and made him feel safe. I had bruises for a week and that boy could not bear to look at me.

'By the time you've done breakfast and a dressings round, the Hun will have arrived.'

'Dr Henning?'

'That's the one. He's on nights at the moment but our own doctors are in short supply and I've been asked, very politely, to refrain from calling on their expertise. I sent the Hun to bed at four am. He will be

back at ten, exhausted, but aren't we all?'

'And if they ask for pain relief before he gets here?'

They were always asking for pain relief.

'If you think it genuine, give them some. Consult my notes for timing.' She opened the drawer of the desk and retrieved a key. 'The drugs cupboard,' she said, dangling it. She looked at me, thoughtfully. 'Some will need more than oral. Have you been trained to give injections?'

'I've prepared a few.' The rules were quite clear on what VADs could and could not do.

'Needs must,' she said. 'Follow me.'

The abdomen, as Matron called him, was too weak to wail and it wasn't until we were by his side that we could hear his pain: a tired whimper, that was all. 'Pay attention,' she said as she swabbed his upper arm with iodine. Then she picked up an ampoule, held it with gauze and broke its neck. She drew the morphia into a syringe. 'One ampoule is usually enough, sixteen milligrams, but sometimes they need more.' She broke the neck of a second ampoule, drew up a little more of the drug. 'Tap and push,' she said, tapping the side of the syringe then pushing a few drops through the needle. 'Thigh or upper arm is best, you want muscle.' Then she grabbed the boy's deltoid between her thumb and fingers: 'Stabilise then stab.'

There was a small indent before the needle sank into his arm. I felt it. I thought I felt it. I rubbed the same spot on my own arm and she looked up, said nothing.

'Slowly,' she said as she pressed on the plunger. 'Fifteen minutes and his mewling should stop.'

Three more demonstrations, each quicker than the one before, then, 'Your turn.' She held out the dish with its remaining iodine swabs, an unused syringe and an ampoule of morphia. 'It's harder than it looks, try not to hesitate.'

I'd seen it done often enough and had rehearsed it in my head, but

that first time felt like a violence.

'A natural,' Matron said. She handed me the kidney dish and walked towards the door. Just before reaching it she stopped, alert to something. 'This one has soiled his sheets,' she said, pointing but not turning around.

I threw the sheets on top of an evening's worth of dirty linen, a macabre canvas mottled with all the colours of human waste. Each had its own odour and, if I paused to think how they coated my tongue, its own flavour too. I thought of Iso's pastels. The reds, yellows and browns. The charcoal – necrotic black, I would call it.

The patient notes *were* meticulous. I carried them with me and did a round of the ward. Each man was breathing; the 'head' in bed nine, barely. I looked at his notes. His left eye, cheekbone and jaw had been blown away, along with a small part of his brain. He was just a head to Matron Livingstone, but his name was Jakob. I held his shoulder and said it aloud, 'Jakob.' Then again, 'Jakob.' It was all I could do.

Over the next couple of hours I took observations – temperature, pulse, blood pressure – and changed dressings. I brought bedpans and urinals and cleaned up any spills. When they said *Wasser*, I fetched water. When they said *Mutter*, I sat and held their hands. At half ten, a Redcap walked onto the ward, a German prisoner beside him. Blue cap, blue trousers, white jersey. The letters PG were printed large and black on the front, the number 29 below. The curls of his fringe were tangled as if he'd just been woken.

'All yours,' the Redcap said, then left without any confirmation that I wanted him.

The prisoner nodded, as he had that first day, the day I wrote in the journal about a German being pushed to his knees. He walked to the nurses' desk and took up the ledger with the patient notes. I realised, then, why they were so detailed, so clear. They had to do the work of a handover.

He disappeared into the storeroom and emerged a moment later wearing his white coat. A doctor, like any other, I thought, though he was wearing clogs. They were a reminder. They kept me alert.

He did his round and ignored me, like any doctor, though avoided might be a better word, and I avoided him. He had two functioning legs and two functioning arms and his hands, I'd noted, were large. I kept to the opposite row of beds but found myself looking for him, constantly. Know the threat and keep it in sight – that was my habit and it had kept me safe, mostly. Though, to be honest, Bill had never been far away. Since we were children Bill had been my shadow.

'I'm surrounded, little brother,' I whispered. And I was angry with him again for not being there, where I could keep an eye on him. Where he could keep an eye on me. His last letter said he was digging trenches somewhere near Paris, *Great view of the Eiffel Tower*, he wrote. It wasn't censored so I knew it was a lie. He would have made an excellent orderly, or cook, or clerk. Why the hell did they give him a gun?

I looked along the ward. Dr Henning was removing a soiled sheet from beneath a patient. There would be no fluids left in him soon, I thought.

I went to the storeroom and stared for a moment at the shelves of linen, their soothing pallet – white is never white, Iso told me. I chose a sheet that Iso would have coloured with a few strokes of pale violet and blue.

Dr Henning rolled the boy slowly towards himself, as gently as if he were made of papier-mâché and rough hands might cause a tear. I arranged the clean sheet. I tucked one side under the mattress and bunched the rest along the centre of the bed, just touching the boy's back and bottom. Such a round word, bottom; his was all bone. I smoothed his pyjamas so they would lie flat beneath his body; a bedsore could kill him. Then I looked up. Dr Henning was waiting. I nodded and

he let the boy roll slowly back. He came around the bed to repeat the movement. I could have done it; I had done it a thousand times and the boy weighed nothing. But I didn't insist. I took the doctor's place on the other side, and when he lifted the boy I pulled the gathered sheet towards me, made it taut, tucked it in, hospital corners, neat and tight. I'd come to appreciate a well-tucked sheet – it was a moment of control at a time when control was elusive. Dr Henning made his observations: pulse, temperature, blood pressure. He leaned in to smell the odour of the boy's breath and I wondered what he might detect. I expected him to grimace but he gave nothing away. He spoke all the while to the boy, his words a curtain of sound that kept me out, a reminder of who they both were. I suppose he was telling him what he was doing.

To me, he said nothing.

From midday, I watched the clock. My stomach growled, though it was impossible to hear it among the sounds of the ward.

At half-twelve a trolley arrived with food for the patients. I delivered it and was surprised when Dr Henning helped. A third were nil by mouth and a third could feed themselves. We spread out among the rest. There were two who refused. One had trouble keeping food down, the other thought to starve himself; some of them did.

I sat with a man who had lost the means to chew and could barely swallow. His lunch was a cup of thickened soup, barely warm. I blew on each spoonful out of habit, then manoeuvred it towards the hole in his face. He would tilt his head back and we both hoped the soup would slide down, find its way. His belly, like mine, was grumbling, always grumbling. We were disappointed, but we tried again and again. We must have had some success because on the last spoonful, he choked. Then vomited. It looked almost the same coming out as it had going

in. A thickened gruel, the colour of pumpkin. It stuck to my apron. It sounds awful now, but back then it was ordinary. They vomited, they bled, they shat. Bits of them we would mop off the floors and parts of them we would wrap in cloth and send to the incinerators. I'll try not to speak of these things too often, because no one really wants to know and I don't care to remember, but sometimes it can't be helped. These things – those men and their bodies – are the background of my story. Without them, nothing I want to remember would have happened.

I sponged the vomit from the front of my apron and hung it in the storeroom.

At two o'clock I realised no one was coming to relieve me, and no one had thought to bring me lunch. Dr Henning was attempting to make a meal out of food the patients had not eaten. My pride protested but my stomach urged. When he was done I browsed the trolley, as if it were a display of cakes. But it was a mess of bowls and plates littered and smeared. I retreated to the nurses' desk and revised the notes I had made hours earlier.

Dr Henning cleared his throat and I looked up. He was holding a plate with a sandwich in the centre – corned beef and cucumber pickle. The plate was clean and the sandwich unmolested.

'They do not always remember us,' he said.

Was it the first time we spoke? I remember being offended. *Us*, he'd said and I thought, we are not the same. I accepted the plate but I did not thank him. I ate the sandwich at the nurses' desk and when I finished I took the plate to the trolley. I saw again the mess of crockery littered and smeared with food and it occurred to me that I'd taken the lunch he had salvaged for himself. That he must have made do with half-eaten scraps. I reminded myself that he was the enemy, but then so was I – he'd been careful not to touch me.

I scanned the ward and found him. In his white coat he was just a doctor like any other. He took the stethoscope from around his neck

and attached it to his ears. He slid the chest piece under the fabric of Jakob's pyjamas and searched, like any doctor would, for the sounds he needed to assess. Heart or lungs, I didn't know, but the movement was familiar and when he'd found the spot he held the diaphragm in place and turned his head to the side, away from the man, all the better to hear what the body had to say. When the body had whispered its secret he took the stethoscope from his ears and placed it around his neck. He cupped Jakob's shoulder, as I had. Then he bent his head.

The plate was still in my hand and I looked at it. There were crumbs from the sandwich and a smear of yellow pickle. We are not the same, I reminded myself.

Dr Henning crossed himself then adjusted Jakob's blanket. He looked up and I didn't have time to look away. 'Soon,' he said.

I stood by the trolley, the plate in my hand. He'd been careful not to touch me but I imagined what the brush of his fingers might have felt like. A phantom touch that prickled my skin and made my limbs soften in a way they hadn't for a long while.

I recalled him on his knees, waiting to be kicked.

It helped. My limbs were once more my own: two pegs on which to stand, nothing more. A relief and a regret.

Within weeks of arriving at Étaples a raw discomfort began to move about my body. It was fatigue, cold, heat, the constant scrubbing of hands, long hours on swollen feet. I was driven mad by the ache and the sting and the itch. The frailty of my body was a surprise and a humiliation and it was sometimes difficult to overcome. *There is no point in you being here if you can't be relied upon*, I was told and so I became reliable. It was like acting – a repeated line to toughen up and the discipline to walk on stage over and over, even when there was no desire to. Before I started on the German ward I had begun to

feel less. It was general and specific. If I paid attention to my body at all, and mostly I tried not to, it felt like being in a tepid bath – neither hot nor cold, no pleasure and little pain. I could do my job but the edges of my body felt blurred; I could not discern them. There was sometimes a tingling, in my fingers and toes, the tip of my tongue, the whole expanse of my belly. I tried not to think I was disintegrating.

The conditions on the German ward were no different to any other: the fatigue, the stifling heat, the constant scrubbing of hands and the long hours on swollen feet. I was neither hot nor cold, I felt no pleasure and little pain.

Then I imagined the brush of his fingers.

They do not always remember us. I wrote his words in the journal. I also wrote that his voice sounded deeper when he spoke English. That when I took the plate he removed his hand instantly. That he looked in my eyes for barely a second (saw fear or hate?) then looked down. Barely a second, but it was long enough to note that his eyes were not just brown, they were *light brown with a halo of burnished gold expanding and contracting around the pupil*. Remember the details, Helen had said. They will be different, Iso had insisted. I wrote this detail down for no particular reason, except that a shiver had run through me when I thought of him handing me the sandwich and I imagined our fingers touching.

The doctor, the German, the Hun. He'd nodded as if to say, *enjoy your day*. Then he was on his knees, in the dirt. He'd offered his lunch so I would not go hungry. But he would not stop to talk and he was careful not to touch. These are the details I began to record.