

**A
HOSPITAL
IN THE
CLOUDS**

MHAIREAD MACLEOD

PREFACE

Out here I call myself Anna, a name similar to my own but not so much that it provides a clue that could arouse suspicion. Writing about everything that happened is difficult. This is partly because I come from a family that has made an artform of being circumspect. But it is much more because I've had to keep secrets for so long. In any case, I'll try to be as honest as possible in setting the record straight. After all, the pursuit of peace is everything to me now.

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When I saw Tom Austen that March morning of 1918, I knew there was something about him I recognised, something shared. It was in his expression as he let me dress his foot, rotten and black around stumps of cartilage where his toes had been surgically removed. He held in the pain, hissing through clenched teeth.

I drew the screen and squeezed a fresh cloth into a warm basin of water. 'Here, Lieutenant Austen, I'll help you off with your things.'

His shirt was damp with sweat, his pants soaked with urine.

'Do you need to use the bedpan?'

'Too late.'

As I pulled off his pyjamas his hand went to cover his crotch.

'You should be used to this by now,' I said, handing him a towel.

I wiped his face, the fair chin stubble uneven from alopecia, then massaged the washer gently down his chest, across red shrapnel scars and under his arms.

'I was quite a hairy bugger until the war,' he said.

'Why didn't you stay in England until your recovery?'

'Must have been homesick. And Australian nurses are much prettier.'

We'd heard that old line from the soldiers many times, as if they were determined to assure us they were still virile men inside those broken bodies. We nurses usually played along – it was our job to heal, after all. But it was more than a job, more than just providing moral support and sympathy. We were part of their new family, we sisters who cared

for them day and night. But the men we tended in the Injured Veterans' Ward of the Cairns District Hospital were only a few of the hundreds who'd been shipped up to regional centres. It made room down south for the newly-arrived from Passchendaele, Pozières, Villers-Brettoneux, Lagnicourt – exotic names these men had no trouble pronouncing.

'How lucky am I, eh? Shelled with phosgene. Didn't realise what was happening. Thought I'd landed back home in a vat of newly picked corn – that's what it smelt like. Didn't feel it at first, then couldn't breathe for the life of me. Crawled around, found my gas mask. Got patched up and sent back. Took another hiding from Fritz. Now this bloody trench foot.'

He made his butchering sound like a jaunty boy's adventure, but I knew the truth. One night when the other men were asleep, I had found him, drawn back into that dark underworld, his body curled into a tight ball, his shoulders shaking.

A fly crawled over the bed, attracted by the rot that even disinfectant swabs couldn't wash out. I flicked it away. 'Your lungs are healing, Lieutenant. Our tropical weather will help. And you *will* get better, you hear?' There was a liver-coloured wound at his neck, fading into scar tissue. At first, I suspected shrapnel damage, but when I looked closer, it resembled the more rounded scar of a bullet. 'How did you get that?'

He propped himself up on one elbow and looked at me. 'I can see what you're thinking. So, don't say it.'

'Say what?'

'That I'm really quite a *lucky* chap.'

'I wasn't going to.'

'Then you'd be the first. That's the platitude they come up with.' He coughed, and the pain from his burned lungs made him slump back as he squeezed his eyes tight, shutting everything out. 'Bloody carbolic floors,' he said.

It was supposed to be a quick wipe down before I changed the basin and cloths for the next patient, but I slowed the process a little, the water wringing and splashing, sponging and soothing the pale landscape of violence. I patted dry the tattooed profile on his bicep. ‘She’s a pretty one. With her dark blue hair flying around.’

‘On leave with the battalion when I had that done. Got myself blotto. Didn’t have a girl to write home to, so I thought I’d carry one in my arms.’ He gave a chuckle then coughed again. ‘It’s just not the sort of thing... an *officer* is supposed to do. Is it, nurse?’

I guessed a warning about STDs would embarrass him, especially from someone his own age, and he’d probably have heard the standard lecture many times. Instead, I said with a smile, ‘You’d know how to set a good example, then.’

‘I’m the least qualified in the world to do that.’

‘Sounds like false modesty to me.’

‘No. Hard to explain – and if I tried, it would probably be bull dust.’

‘What’s with all the chit chat?’ The Sergeant, as they called him, just a shadow on the bed behind the calico screen, had been dismembered by shellfire – his left leg torn off and his right arm amputated at the elbow. The weight of tissue and bone was now replaced with leaden discontent. He had a nose for weakness and thought he sensed this in Austen, who even here remained his military superior.

‘I’ll be with you soon, sergeant.’

Austen ignored him. ‘You don’t usually do this, the washing, do you?’

‘Some junior nurses are down with something.’

‘Anyway, you’re my favourite Scottish nurse.’

‘Is it that obvious? Well, I consider myself Australian now, just like you, serving the glorious British Empire.’ I immediately regretted the sarcasm, but he didn’t react. ‘Matron Chalmers will give it to me if we keep talking.’

‘*Charmers*, we call her in this ward.’

‘That’s a bit sarcastic.’

‘Obvious reasons, don’t you think?’

But he’d obviously charmed *her*. On the shelf behind his bed were photos of the Bastille and a roughly drawn portrait of a young girl. Pictures, or anything else which might encourage clutter and germs were not usually allowed.

‘Nurse Anna, isn’t it?’ he asked.

‘You can call me Sister Sinclair.’

I was one of the newly certified junior sisters. At Brisbane city’s General Hospital, I’d been a pupil nurse, staff, and charge nurse. I’d done my rota in surgical as the ‘dirty’ nurse, cleaning blood off the walls and floor in the operating theatre, counting used swabs and gloves, brushing out the tracheostomy tubes with a feather, sterilising the forceps, clamps, saws and scissors in spitting, boiling water. The hospital culture was one that suited me – the busyness of it gave me a sense of belonging, of community; the work was therapeutic, even addictive.

‘Well, you can call me Tom,’ he said.

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After the patients were washed and changed and The Sergeant’s underarm rash treated with salve, I went back to Tom, and took him out to the veranda in the wicker wheelchair. In the breezeless air, the humidity stuck to my skin like a fever.

‘It’s sure as hell getting dark out here.’ He pointed to the sky clouding over the sea.

The Sergeant craned over his crutch: ‘A storm must be coming. Look at those boats.’

Yachts and smaller vessels pitched over the agitated waves as they made towards the river inlet and the protection of the mangrove trees.

‘With a bit of luck, it’ll blow all the officers away,’ I said.

Tom responded, clutching his chest. ‘Aw. That went right through me.’ There was no weeping in daylight.

I went back to the ward and helped Sybil turn the beds and retrieve the bedpans.

‘Well, well! Look who’s flirting with you,’ she said as we changed the sheets. ‘But you can’t have him,’ she said, laughing. ‘The lieutenant is mine!’

‘He’s just bunging it on. He doesn’t mean anything by it.’

‘He’s been asking questions about you.’

‘I hope you didn’t tell him too much.’

‘Nah. Only that you’re a widow and from Edinburgh.’

Three years and it still felt strange, being called ‘widow’. I should be surrounded by lace doilies, cats, and grandchildren. Sometimes, rolling a patient over, when that familiar twinge in my lower spine came, I felt like one. I’d counted the number of times in a typical shift that I’d have to do this – about fifty – twice my age.

We were interrupted by Matron running from her office. ‘Get the patients inside and windows blocked. Now! Telegraph’s come. It’s confirmed. Cyclone’s going to hit.’

The sky, the sea, the wind had all been so calm that it took us by surprise.

‘Matron, may I use the telephone?’

‘No – it’s not for personal calls, Sister Sinclair. Get that cart down to the laundry.’ She was the old breed; dedicated to and intent on keeping the respectability hard-earned by Nightingale. Thick-waisted and solid, Matron Alice Chalmers would forge through the hospital, her quick arms thrusting a path before her, as if her critical guidance was required everywhere at once. We were her substitute family – she, assisted by Deputy Matron Verity Timms who had returned from the Front, was the mother; the Medical Superintendent the father; the staff nurses and

sisters her daughters. Even the hospital motto could have been distilled from her essence: Honor et Servitas.

Downstairs, the entrance was being latched and blocked. There was nowhere for a building full of sick people to hide. The sea began to swell and simmer; trees on the esplanade tossed their leaves like great grey creatures shaking off water, dropping branches onto the sand. People had deserted the shore. Papers, odd objects were flicked up and skittered down the street. In upstairs wards, the orderlies and patients who were mobile helped take everything in from the veranda and block the windows with stripped beds and mattresses.

‘Don’t you worry,’ I reassured a soldier with bandaged eyes. ‘This building isn’t going anywhere. It’s solid brick.’ I did not mention the hospital in Townsville. In the last cyclone it had been blown into a pile of rubble.

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The storm stripped roofs and felled large trees, hosing the evening blues out of the sea and sky, smashing the ocean against the foreshore. It crashed into everyone’s lives, pushing hard rain through doors which shook on their hinges. Our non-infectious patients were forced into two crowded rooms – women, children and veterans ordered to their beds while we waited for the scream and roar of that black evening to stop.

‘Bloody hell!’ someone shouted. ‘We’re going to lose the roof.’

Evie, almost four, would be huddled and confused in our rented room on the esplanade with Dorrie, our landlady. They’d be terrified, the walls sucked in by the pressure. So much of this town was temporary, sheet-iron houses collapsing into clay, as if it still hadn’t the nerve to put down foundations.

As I walked downstairs, I saw Deputy Matron Timms on her knees and pressed up against the front door, her hand frozen on the handle.

Her expression was fixed, terrified.

‘Deputy Matron... Verity... it’s all right. Leave it.’ I took her hand away.

She snatched it back. ‘We all have to get out now!’

I held her firmly. ‘This will blow over. You’re having a panic attack. Remember to breathe. I’m with you.’

When she had calmed, she said, ‘It’s like the gunfire. That was so silly of me. I’ve never done that before. Please don’t tell Matron.’

‘Of course not.’

When we returned to the wards, the sound of timber squealed against the corrugated roof. Tom crawled under his bed. He and Timms were still fighting the same war.

I knelt on the floor. ‘You’re safe in here, Lieutenant Austen. Nothing will get you.’ I wished I fully believed it.

‘He’s a sodding coward,’ The Sergeant said. ‘Officers got off lightly,’ he pronounced within earshot of Tom.

‘It’s just a touch of nerves,’ I replied. It was clear that Tom shouldn’t have been transferred from the city where there was some form of treatment for shell shock, even if only experimental at this stage.

‘Can’t you give the bugger something to shut him up? Between him and this bloody wind, I’m going crazy myself.’

I lay on the floor and began a lullaby I used to sing to Evie – the lyrics nonsensical – until Tom settled into a sob.

It was too much for The Sergeant. ‘The British army would put a bullet in his head if they got hold of him.’

I massaged Tom’s neck, my cuff catching in his hair. ‘We’ll look after you.’

He bit the fabric of my sleeve as if trying to swallow a scream.

There was a bottle of *P. Opii* pills in the dispensary. Just one would be all that was needed. I thought about dashing down to get it while it was unguarded, with everyone fixed to their allotted places by the

storm. I could risk giving him a dose without prescription and I knew where 'Major Matron' kept the key.

Instead, I whispered, 'Shh. You're safe now. You're with friends. You are a *man*, a *brave* man.'

Tom Austen, and countless other brave men, like Andy, my husband. Did he cry when he was sliced in half by Ottoman fire? Did he feel that terror? They said it was quick – but they always do. When his ship pulled away from the wharf, the waving soldiers packed together, the horn blasting with pride, I couldn't feel it, I couldn't register the words around me: 'so *brave*,' and, 'it won't be long before your husband is back.' I knew this war was a disastrous, foolish thing, and I wasn't the only one.

Anger was my defence. It had never really left. I'd read about the votes against conscription, the anti-war rallies, and I joined the Women's Peace Army with its paradoxical name. We were condemned for being a Marxist confederacy of weaklings and traitors; even our own soldiers tormented us. But I needed that sense of release, I needed to regain that feeling that I could change everything. I marched under the purple, green and white flag and handed out pamphlets in the streets, gaining comfort in the sense of *déjà vu*. We sang *I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier* under threat of being arrested for doing so. A year later I had to face the Women's Compulsory Service Conscription League and became embroiled in a home-front battle of our own. It was described as a 'catfight' by the press, but it was more than that for me. I was standing beside Margaret Thorp when we were set upon. At first, I was just an observer of the fury around us, the invective, remembering things I'd previously tried to forget. Then a woman came at me like a crazed bear, pulling my hair and scratching at my eyes. I found myself fighting back and punched her in the cheek with such force my knuckles split. As the police marched us away, the beaten militants, I whispered to Margaret, 'Is it violence for peace, now?' She gave me a tired smile.

‘What on earth are you doing, Sister?’ Matron materialised behind me in her rubber soles.

‘It’s just an episode of neurasthenia. He seems to have it together now.’

‘That’s for a *doctor* to diagnose. You know the rules. Next time, you see me and we’ll give him something to settle him down. If he starts this again, we’ll have to send him back to Brisbane.’

‘Perhaps that’s for the best.’

‘Once again, that’s not for you to say, Sister. You keep forgetting your place.’

I helped him back onto the bed with difficulty. He spoke some peculiar words that sounded like German. He seemed unaware of me, his teeth chattering. When I lay him down, he reached up and clutched at my throat. Matron helped me prise away the hand which had already ripped out my collar button.

‘He’s gone mad,’ she said with a sigh and picked up her lamp. The darkness under her eyes, the thin hair of her widow’s peak, were prominent under the light.

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A few of the mobile patients went to the window to peer through mattresses and I herded them back to their spots. In the vacuum of the storm’s eye, the sky directly above was suddenly clear and bright with a smattering of stars.

Outside, eerie objects lay strewn in the oppressive quiet – sheet-iron wrapped around tree trunks, mangled things with wheels, bicycles and a wheelbarrow. A couple of men were trying their luck, swinging lanterns among the debris, looking for salvageable items. I could easily run home to my daughter in this lull. My eleven-hour shift had ended hours before, and it was only a few blocks away – our flimsy shore-front home with its knocked-together wooden walls and tinsplate roof.

There was a stupendous *boom* and the ground rumbled. In that moment of shock, I was back on a dark hill in Edinburgh, running down through the long grass, breathless, forcing myself forward, heart burning, ears ringing. But it was only an ancient fig tree that had fallen just short of the hospital, roots so sodden the massive thing could no longer support itself. Suddenly, the ocean edge formed into towering walls, white breaking into brown against the trees across the dirt road, bulldozing large branches before it. Surely Dorrie had had the good sense to get Evie out of our cabinet room downstairs before the ocean scrambled in. The sea-line was the same distance from the house as the hospital, but here we were saved by the security of cement and brick.

As the wave hit, another fossicker, a woman, was snatched away like an after-thought. The dot of her head appeared above the foam, sticklike arms rigid in the air. I called out, but she was whisked away and dissolved into the ocean. It could almost have been a hallucination. The longer I looked at the moonlit sea where she had been, the more I convinced myself I was just fatigued and it was only a log. But Matron had seen it too and shook her head at me in warning. Those broken by the cyclone would be tomorrow's reckoning for the staff. I felt numb with the thought of it.

The edge of the eye passed, followed by an anticlockwise frenzy. The building thumped and banged on the opposite side and the hall filled with the din of windows splintering. Before I'd left for work that morning, Evie had told me firmly that she wanted to go home to Brisbane. I'd thought about it: going back, leaving the swamps to the mosquitoes. Back to where Andy and I had lived before he marched away, convinced he'd return in a few months with a trophy enemy flag.