

# ONE

The Great War. So long ago, and yet, as close as yesterday. The ships steaming out of Quebec City on a perfect fall afternoon. The casualty clearing station that was my home for four years. The constant rumble of guns just over the horizon. The eyes of my first patient, gassed at Ypres: wild, frenzied, his hands clawing at his throat, his skin the colour of mahogany.

When the last hospital ship left Boulogne nearly 60 years ago, I left all that behind, and I never looked back. Until now.

My grandniece Katie wants me to write a book about it. It's International Women's Year, some idea dreamed up by the United Nations. "Please, Auntie Mag," she says. "You were a hero. You did something important for women."

"Stuff and nonsense," I say. "I just did my duty." I can see she's disappointed. I don't like to let her down. She's a good niece and I'm very fond of her. She visits me often, brings me little gifts, takes me on outings we both enjoy. But she's looking for some kind of heroine, and all I did was answer my calling to nurse. I was needed, so I went.

When we parted today, she begged me to at least think about it. I can still see her earnest face, those bright blue eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, that cloud of curly, reddish-brown hair. So like my sister Helen. My sister who left with me on that bright October day in 1914 but who came back home two years later, a stranger addicted to morphine, lost in her own world.

I'm back in my room now, going through my hatbox full of souvenirs, letters, clippings, photos, pressed flowers, medals, all kinds of artifacts of a life well-lived, with no regrets. I pick up a photo at random: six young people, dressed in summer clothes, leaning against a bale of hay, laughing in the sun. On the back of the photo, it reads July 22, 1914.

The last summer of my youth.

A wonderful summer: that picnic in the country, playing hide-and-seek in the hay, eating fried chicken and watermelon, laughing till our sides ached. My best friends, all nursing graduates from St. Vincent's in Winnipeg, with their various beaux, husbands and friends, celebrating summer, and youth, and friendship. I remember thinking, as I lay in the grass, staring up at the blue, blue sky, that I was perfectly happy. I wanted time to stand still. I wanted us all to be together like this forever.

Back in those days, Helen and I were public health nurses in North End Winnipeg. It was hard work. Terrible poverty, thousands of immigrants who didn't speak English; the crowding, the poor sanitation, the violence, the drink. We arrived fresh out of nursing school, and by the end of our first week, we'd seen it all: cholera, tuberculosis, meningitis, diphtheria, starvation, neglect, crimes of every description.

Our parents hated that we worked there. Not fit work for ladies, father said. I forbid you to go. But we couldn't stand by, knowing people lived like that, and do nothing. That's not how we were raised.

Perhaps it wasn't the most genteel of professions, but no one harmed us. We walked those streets with perfect safety. People knew our names, came out of their houses and asked us for help. They trusted us with their secrets. Gave us food from their shops and invited us to their celebrations.

I was the serious one, Helen the lively one. She played hide-and-seek with the kids, hugged and cried with the women, knew just how far to flirt with the men, just enough to make them feel good. We treated their illnesses, delivered their babies, bound their wounds, and mourned their dead. We were a team, and we were proud of what we did.

Helen was the one who wanted to sign up. We're needed *here*, I argued. But she went on and on about the Empire, and the terrible Huns, and our boys suffering so far from home. She'd met a nurse from the Boer War, Matron MacDonald, in our last year at St. Vincent's, and they had talked late into the night. It's noble, said Helen. We have a duty to the civilizations of the world. We have a duty to the Mother Country.

Well, our Mother Country is Ireland, I replied, and we were born in Ontario. What's this got to do with us?

Of course, she won me over. She always did. I could never say no to Helen. Life was always an adventure when she was around. Always on the move, always laughing, teasing me, daring me to be outrageous. If she was depressed sometimes, I would just hug her and sing the songs of our childhood to her. Soon, she would be fine, my wonderful sister, my best friend, and we would take up where we left off.