

THE RICE PAPER DIARIES

for my great-aunt Menna Wilders, née Gillies, 1915-1996
Stanley Internment Camp, Hong Kong Island
January 1942-August 1945

THE RICE
PAPER DIARIES

by

Francesca Rhydderch

SEREN

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*If every departure from the native land is a
small death, then every return is a resurrection.*

Kica Kolbe

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LONDON, 1996

Marge seems to gather ill feeling around her, like the flesh that bowls out around her hips. She has a way of staring at people, and of holding their gaze when they catch her eye by mistake. She is unnerving.

She isn't much of a tea girl either. People who ask for milk get it slopped into their saucer as well as their cup. Mostly, though, they keep quiet as it is handed over. 'Thank you,' some of them say, in the same pleading tone of voice they use with the nurses. Marge takes no notice. She understands they don't mean it; what they mean is they'd like someone else to come pushing the tea trolley past their bed, someone who'll talk about the weather and call them 'dear'. Someone homely. Later they shuffle along the corridor in their dressing gowns to Elsa's side room for a chat.

'That Marge,' they say. 'She doesn't know if she's coming or going.'

But nor does Elsa, that's the problem. She's lost the shape of the day, so that the beginnings are the end and then the beginning again. By the time Marge turns up, Elsa is quite pleased to see her. She knows then that it is the afternoon, and it will soon be visiting time.

'Cup of tea?'

Marge stands in the doorway, one hand on the trolley and the other on her hips. She has put a new colour on her hair, and it's come out dark pink. Elsa doesn't know if she meant for it to come out like that. It makes her jowls look more flushed and sweaty than usual. She looks like an angry pig.

'Is it visiting time yet?' Elsa asks.

'Tea first,' says Marge. 'Want a cup?'

'Yes, please.'

Marge turns to the trolley.

'Milk, sugar?'

Elsa knows that the thick china will feel like clay against her lips, and the stewed tea will taste bad.

'You don't have a slice of lemon, do you?'

Marge frowns.

'You're mad, you are.' She has rows of thin gold hoops hanging from her nostrils. When she shakes her head the hoops shake with her.

'Just a bit of sugar, then.' Elsa pulls herself up on the metal rail at the side of the bed. Marge brings the tray-table over her lap and puts the cup and saucer down on it. For a moment, Elsa understands what it is the other patients want from Marge. There is a silence hollowing out the air between them that Elsa wants to fill. Marge reaches over to the trolley again to fetch a miniature aluminium jug. Elsa opens her mouth to remind her that she doesn't want milk, but thinks better of it.

'Biscuit?' Marge's attention seems to be taken up by something on the rooftops the other side of the window.

'No, thanks.'

'See ya,' Marge says, and she's gone. The piles of saucers and cups rattle all the way along the corridor. There's a bang as she pushes her trolley against the double doors and heaves her way towards the lift.

A nurse pokes her head round the door.

'How are you today, Elsa?' she says. She is a square woman who doesn't seem to mind bundling parcels of old people in and out of beds and baths and onto toilets and back into bed again. She is from Serbia, she told Elsa one day, when she was making her bed. 'Did you come over because of the war?' Elsa

had asked. 'War? Oh, no. I am the first of my family. My husband has an MA in Business Administration,' she'd said. Today though, she has no smile and no time. It's nearly the end of her shift.

'Could I use the phone?' says Elsa.

'You have change?'

Elsa likes the precise, correct way the nurse speaks English, each vowel pushed up against its neighbouring consonant and worked hard to make the right sound.

She reaches out to the bedside cabinet for her handbag. The cupboard is on wheels and it slides away from her as she's trying to reach it. Everything in this place is on wheels, so that in the end you slip and slither your way from one thing to another. It's a wonder Elsa isn't seasick. The nurse taps her way out of the room and down the corridor towards the day room.

Elsa opens the clasp on her bag and pats her hand around inside. The light is bad in here, maybe because of the dirty windows, where the traffic fumes have settled into the corners of the frames, or perhaps the day is starting to fade earlier than it should. She yearns for the bright light of the morning, the way it used to be, at home in her kitchen. But now she wants to talk to Mari, to hear the sound of her voice close to her in the receiver. She pushes her hand deeper into the bag, feeling into the corners for her purse. She turns the bag upside down and everything tips out onto the green sheets: paper handkerchiefs, some mints (individually wrapped), a pack of cards, an old passport with clipped corners, and a bottle of pearl pink nail varnish.

'I've told you before about the nail varnish,' says the Serbian nurse, pushing the phone box in on wheels in front of her. 'I'm just going to have to take it off again tonight before the duty doctor comes round.'

Elsa puts the varnish back into her bag. The nurse will take it off, and Elsa will paint it back on again under the night lights, and so it will go on.

‘I’m going to phone my daughter,’ Elsa says.

‘Yes, yes.’ Even the nurse’s smile is brisk.

Elsa opens her purse and pulls out a few twenty-pence pieces and puts them in a row on the coverlet in front of her. She breathes in its regulation, disinfectant smell. She jumps as the money drops down into the empty box below. She can hear the phone ringing at the other end, and her heart lifts and falls as she waits for the click that will tell her Mari has picked up. But it keeps on ringing until, sighing, she puts the money back in her purse.

The peace is broken by a harsh, buzzing sound. The doors to the ward open and close and people tramp past her room in small groups – their footsteps either hesitant and dutiful, or quick, too quick, resenting this intrusion into their time. She lies back on her pillow and watches their shadows moving against the blue wall of the corridor opposite, and wonders if she did remember to ask the nurse to open the window after all, because the light seems clearer, suddenly, and the birds in the plane trees outside whistle out a fierce duet with the traffic four storeys below. She’ll wait a few minutes, then she’ll try again.

‘Oi!’ A voice rises up above the others from the street, and she thinks of Marge, set free for the rest of the day, rushing to catch a bus or tube. She thinks of her swinging her haunches from side to side to make space for herself in the crowd, pulling herself up onto the 160 to Chislehurst.

‘Think of a pig,’ Elsa’s teacher had said once at school. They’d been told to draw a map of Wales, and at nine years old Elsa hadn’t known where to begin: her world then didn’t stretch beyond Gwelfor and New Quay School and Towyn

Chapel next to the Memorial Hall. ‘This,’ said the teacher, flourishing the chalk, ‘is its snout – Anglesey.’ Elsa watched the chalk scraping across the blackboard and fine particles of white dust falling away as it went. ‘Front legs... Llŷn Peninsula... Pembrokeshire’s the hind legs... the Valleys are the rump... and Cardiff’s the curly tail, before you reach England on the other side.’ Something about the way she insisted on loitering at every point, taking pleasure in doing things properly, laughing at her own joke, reminded Elsa of her mother standing in the back kitchen making brawn. Once they’d eaten all they could of the pig, Elsa’s mother used to turn her attention to its head. ‘Put it all in,’ she used to say, slicing off the cheeks and ears and dropping them with the rest of the head into the pan, along with the trotters and tail. ‘That’s the way to do things. Use up every scrap.’ Elsa obediently followed her teacher’s instructions and got on with her map, marking Cardigan Bay (the pig’s belly) and New Quay (its teats) in Indian ink, her mouth watering, tasting already the thick sauce of the salted brawn that her mother or Nannon would spoon out into a serving dish for their supper when she got home.

Maybe that’s why Elsa isn’t completely indifferent to Marge. She reminds Elsa of home. Not Galskarth Road, Clapham, but of where she was born, in a house overlooking the sea. Gwelfor. Her mother’s house. Her father’s too, of course, but she always thinks of it as her mother’s.

Elsa smiles. She sees pigs chasing each other up and down the hills that run down to the sea off New Quay, herds and herds of them. She loses count. She is asleep.