

EMPTY REAN

A HOLOCAUST NOVEL

R. WILLIAM CHAPMAN II

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE HOLOCAUST was the organized persecution and murder of six million Jews, along with millions of other victims targeted by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. Its enormity belongs first to history, memory, testimony, and the people who endured it. No novel can fully hold the scale of that suffering or the individuality of every life taken.

As a young man, I visited the Dachau concentration camp. That experience left a permanent mark on my conscience. I carried that memory with me through my own encounters with war, law, obedience, fear, and institutional violence. Those experiences deepened my belief that remembrance is a moral duty and that the failures which made the Holocaust possible must be confronted with honesty and humility.

Empyrean is a work of fiction. Its characters, private conversations, individual fates, and central narrative are imagined. The novel is set within the historical reality of the Holocaust, and it does not depict the experience of any specific survivor, victim, family, or documented historical figure. It does not attempt to replace history, testimony, or the lived memory of survivors and their descendants.

For readers whose families carry the wounds of the Holocaust, I offer this work with respect. The victims of the Holocaust were not abstractions. They were mothers, fathers, children,

poets, workers, teachers, neighbors, and entire worlds unto themselves. This novel is offered in recognition of their humanity and in reverence for the duty to remember the antisemitism, obedience, indifference, cruelty, and institutional failure that made such evil possible.

May the memory of the victims of the Holocaust endure, and may remembrance deepen our obligation to one another.

**FIELD HOSPITAL,
SCHESSLITZ**



TO A MAN fresh from the foxholes of the Ardennes, her cleanliness was almost profane, a beauty out of step with mud and cordite. Yet by simple presence, she pushed the front lines a little farther from his mind. She stepped through the ward like daylight—a crisp gown, a red cross bright against rhubarb-colored hair, a handkerchief keeping every strand in place.

“Captain,” she said, voice neither tentative nor brusque, “I’m Nurse Sabina. I’ve come to look at your wound.”

A whiff of iodine rose as Sabina tugged back the field-gray blanket, its vapor biting the captain’s eyes. Sabina lifted the gauze layer over the captain’s abdomen; cool air licked the stitched canal through his flesh. Pain jolted—bright, petulant. She gave a brief nod, satisfied with the wound’s progress, then dropped the soiled dressings into the enamel basin with a wet slap.

“Back in a moment for fresh sutures,” she murmured, and disappeared, her footsteps as brisk as shorthand.

The captain looked to the basin resting on the bedside table. He noticed a small blood-soaked shard sitting beside the basin. He reached, fingers trembling traitorously, and palmed the jagged fragment. Cold seeped into his calluses. It weighed almost nothing, yet his arm sagged. He turned it under the lantern: jagged crescent, lead gray, edges gnawed by bone.

Sabina entered again and, without waiting for permission, swung the window open. Spring spilled in—wet grass, thawed manure, the faint insistence of lilacs resurrecting themselves where tanks had parked.

“I hope you don’t mind that we saved that little souvenir for you.” Her syllables were seasoned with a French accent.

The captain chuckled, still rolling the fragment over between his fingers.

"Your vitals are normal," she told him, her gaze not leaving the wound. "But how do you feel, Captain?"

He stared at the ceiling's peeling white, then back at the fragment. His grip tightened slightly around the metal. "Bored."

"Why so?"

"I've lived in a world where a man is always late for something. Healing demands nothing but patience, and patience is a dull companion." He gestured toward the bedside stand—Bible, folded newspaper, the stub of a pencil. "I've read every hollow word in both of those a hundred times."

"Are you a Christian?"

The captain hesitated, his gaze drifting toward the window before answering. "Born and raised. Trinity Episcopal School for Boys, Detroit."

She met his gaze. "I asked if you are a Christian."

A sigh eased past the morphine. "Before the war, I'd have said yes . . ."

He exhaled slowly, the words seeming to settle heavily in the space between them.

"But now, I don't know."

She clipped soiled gauze into a metal pan. "Perhaps something might fill the void while you wait for an answer?"

"Oh?" A flicker of sarcasm. "What miracle tonic do you prescribe, nurse?"

"Most of the ward's books are propaganda pamphlets or sermons so sugary they risk diabetic shock. Have you ever heard of Dostoyevsky?"

The captain snorted. "Russian literature? What makes you think a simple boy from the Midwest could use a Russki manifesto? Training me for the next war?"

"Simple boy?" She tapped the silver bars resting on his side table. "Uncle Sam and I suspect otherwise. Trust me. But if you hate it, I'll fetch something more age appropriate. Perhaps the Brothers Grimm?"

He laughed, too hard, and winced as stitches protested. "Careful, nurse. I may bleed to keep you around longer. If Mister

Dostoyevsky proves more entertaining than these walls,” he continued once the pain receded, “I’ll devour him. But only on one condition.”

Sabina arched a brow.

“That you’ll discuss it with me afterward. There’s no greater hell than having something to say and no one willing to listen.”

“Perhaps,” she said, smoothing fresh gauze against his skin, “if your wound permits.”

“But I suspect you will do more than just discuss it.”

She laid the final strip of tape with the tenderness of sealing a letter, eased the gown back into place, and closed the window just enough to leave the lilac scent lingering. The captain watched her depart, the click of her heels swallowed by the corridor.

As dusk approached, a single kerosene lamp burned beside the captain, throwing long bars of ochre between deep shadows. In that lamplight walked the chaplain, a thick man in a drab green threadbare greatcoat, boots polished but scuffed at the toes, beard silvering like frost across dark bark.

The chaplain paused beside the captain’s bed, hat in hand.

The captain shifted slightly against the pillow, studying him without greeting.

“Evening, Captain. I’m making rounds. Thought I’d see how the soul fits the body tonight.”

“I’m quite busy.” The captain nudged the novel without opening it. “Counting ceiling cracks, debating theodicy, usual convalescent fare. I won’t keep you from worthier cases.”

“A night off from worthiness would be mercy.” The chaplain smiled. “May I sit? It’s been a long day of heroes insisting they need no help.”

He hesitated, then gestured to the cane-back chair. “Suit yourself.”

The chaplain lowered himself with a wince. “Fourteen amputations today, three last rites, and one baptism in a washbasin. Life insists on variety, even in ruin.”

“Variety . . .” The captain’s jaw tightened. “Tell me, Chaplain, what’s your God’s role in all of this?”

“Ahh, Captain—the age-old question: either God is an absentee landlord or an evil one?” The chaplain folded his hands. “I have much to say on that, in time, Captain. But I won’t bore you with theology in such an austere environment. First, tell me about yourself.”

The captain’s voice sharpened. “I came from playing tag in the Ardennes. It appears that I’m ‘it.’” The captain chuckled.

The chaplain didn’t smile but listened intently.

“But I was the lucky one; a lot of purple hearts were earned that day—some of them may be here, and they need you more than I. Tell me, Chaplain, was this part of God’s plan?”

The chaplain reached for the lamp wick, lowering the flame. Shadows climbed the wall.

“Better to light one candle than curse the darkness. The hard part of my job is choosing which candle,” the chaplain said softly.

The chaplain reached inside his coat, withdrew a slip of folded paper, an old field report stained with iodine. “This records a village accidentally shelled when maps were misaligned. It was my first dose of this cruel world of war. I keep it close, lest I mistake my uniform for my conscience. Righteousness wields a bright sword; it also casts a long shadow. Salvation can be found in keeping your humanity even in times like these, and that is especially hard for men at the top.”

The captain’s mouth hardened, but words failed him.

Silence throbbed between them.

At last, the captain spoke, “Since D-Day, I’ve lost 222 men . . .” His voice dropped, the words measured now. “I wrote each letter, and I carry each name.”

“I am sure you must be enraged at the Germans for what they have done?”

“Enraged?” The captain scoffed.

He looked away, jaw tightening.

“I dream of spilling Kraut blood. I’d storm Berlin myself with a knife between my teeth if the General gave me the order.”

The chaplain let the moment breathe. “I have no doubt you would,” he said. “Do not let that rage harden. Weep, and be not

consoled, for that sorrow will soften to tender grief, and grief, if honored, opens the gate to peace.”

“Nice words, Chaplain. But we’re at war; there isn’t time for peace.”

The captain’s shoulders caved.

“But look at me. I’m an invalid, stitched like a rag doll while the war crawls on. Humiliation fits tighter than these bandages.”

“A bullet tore through your abdomen, not your valor.”

The chaplain glanced around the ward.

“Men out there still breathe because you stood where bullets flew. Humiliation is the heart mistaking survival for insufficiency.”

The captain closed his eyes. “And what of God? Where was He?” He choked.

The chaplain waited.

“Your church,” the captain continued hoarsely, “spread incense while Hitler grew strong. Condemned evil too late, too softly.”

The chaplain bowed his head. “I cannot mend the church’s cowardice with phrases. But I can kneel beside one soldier and share the weight of his question.” He straightened, eyes shining.

The captain watched the chaplain silently and listened.

“My war is inside these walls, Captain. Trauma erupts, and the tribe hunts a scapegoat to cage its fear. Yesterday’s oppressor becomes today’s enemy within. Yet every man who risks a kindness sabotages that cycle. Do not close the door to peace, mercy, and kindness; it may be our only hope.”

The captain exhaled. “You speak of tenderness as if it could rebuild Warsaw.”

“I have no doubt that it will. Brick by brick, smile by smile.” The chaplain rose, joints popping. “But tenderness begins here.” He touched his heart.

A nurse passed, adjusting morphine drips. Beyond the windows, gray smudged the horizon.

“I have other beds to visit,” the chaplain said, “yet I would stay if you permitted.”

The captain managed a weary grin. "It's been a long war for both of us. Sit a while longer."

The chaplain settled back. Lamplight flickered. They spoke then in quieter tones, of Detroit factories and Bavarian orchards. And when the captain finally slept, he breathed steadily, and the chaplain bowed and slipped away.

PARIS, OCCUPIED FRANCE



THE LAST RIFF of the saxophone died on a bent note just as a Wehrmacht motorcycle backfired. Even music seemed to duck now, like a guilty animal. Ionel Abramovich paused on the fourth-floor landing, letting the vibration settle in his chest.

When he entered, the flat smelled of boiled chicory. Esther was already on her knees, prying the same wooden plank she had loosened the night before. Light from a single candle skated along her cheek; hunger had sharpened her face into something almost prophetic.

“Any luck?”

“I didn’t get far. Two patrols tonight,” he said. “One took the baker.”

He set the satchel down more carefully than necessary. From it, he drew a book wrapped in newsprint and a separate sheet bearing a poem. Printer’s ink clung to the pages. He opened to the flyleaf and, without quite knowing why, pressed his thumb into the candle’s softened rim, then onto the paper, leaving a crescent of warm wax over Victor Hugo’s name.

And another crescent over his own name on the poem.

“Your fingerprint in wax,” Esther murmured. She glanced toward the door, then back at him. “Evidence.”

“Or signature,” he said.

He knelt beside her and kissed her forehead. Beneath the plank waited a narrow grave of words: Rilke, Zangwill, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Sartre’s leaflets, along with a slim Baal-Shem commentary. He nestled Hugo among them, placing the neatly printed poem inside the cover. Wood creaked like a broken violin.

“Papa, why are you putting books under the floor?”

Esther gathered Miriam into her arms, the way a mother knows how to.

“The world is changing. Words have no place here, Miriam. But they will again, one day.”

She slowly lifted the copy of *Les Misérables*, flipping to the first page.

“You remember Cosette?” Esther said with a smile, brushing Miriam’s hair to the side.

“I do, Mama, but Cosette makes me cry. Cosette makes me miss you even when you’re here.”

A knock rattled the front door—quick, official.

Ionel froze.

Miriam startled on the divan, her doll wobbling in her arms.

Before fear could bloom, the concierge’s voice slipped through the keyhole. “Decree for your star badges. Sewing inspections begin at dawn.” The paper slid under the door; footsteps retreated, relieved of further courage.

Ionel unfolded the leaflet: neat columns of regulations, each one smaller than the last, tightening like a noose. He felt Esther’s gaze, steady as a surgeon’s hand.

“We can still leave,” Esther whispered. Her voice barely carried across the room. “South, maybe Switzerland.”

“And hand Miriam to smugglers?” He shook his head.

Miriam padded over, pushing her doll toward him.

“Papa, tell the bread thief story again,” Miriam said, half asleep.

“Another night,” he whispered.

The curfew siren swelled, a hollow animal howl that swallowed every other sound.

Ionel felt his childhood: Odessa winter, his father tracing Hebrew letters in frost on a windowpane, as if even ice could serve as parchment. The memory stung and fled.

He crossed to the window. Rain had begun—light, apologetic. A scent of wet lilac drifted up from a half-bombed courtyard garden. The fragrance startled him.

Bootsteps clacked in the stairwell. Esther’s fingers hooked the candlewick, pinched it dark. They listened: three steps, a pause,

three steps—Gestapo cadence. Miriam held her breath. The steps continued upward.

“Someone else tonight. What do we do if they come?” Esther whispered.

Ionel turned, spoke so softly the air had to lean in.

“We’ll barter again.” He didn’t look at her when he said it.

She stared at him. The answer felt both untrue and inadequate.

Miriam climbed onto a chair where she slept, her doll’s porcelain hand brushing the yellow star laid out for stitching. “Will we glow like the moon with these?”

“No, petite,” Esther said, her voice breaking. “We will find each other quicker.”

Ionel lifted the star, felt the cheap cloth itch against his palm. He wanted to promise dawn would return their names unaltered, but he saw doubt in the curve of Esther’s lips and in his own reflection on the darkened window.

He set the star down and took Miriam in his arms. “We leave together,” he said, speaking to both of them, to the hidden books, to the stubborn lilac outside, “or not at all.”

Bootsteps retreated down the street, and the flat exhaled. He pressed his palm to the floorboard above Hugo, feeling the wax thumbprint cooling in darkness.

Outside, rain deepened, tapping coded messages on shuttered cafés where trumpets slept.

**FIELD HOSPITAL,
SCHESSLITZ**



THE CAPTAIN SAT half upright against two pillows, one hand spread over the bandage at his abdomen. On the bedside stand stood a cup of coffee, gone cold enough to skin over, its gray film intact, a small domestic disgust he could not bring himself to either drink or throw away. Around him, the hospital persisted in its own indifferent liturgy—basins, clipped orders, the hush after morphine rounds.

He had been trying not to hear the front in his mind.

A figure darkened the doorway. Lieutenant Josiah Foster stood there with his spectacles clouded by rain and a fresh bandage wrapped about his forearm. A strip of hair at his temple had been shaved and stitched. He looked, to the captain's eye, worse for wear.

"Lieutenant," the captain said. "Did you lose an argument with a fence post?"

"Shrapnel, sir."

"And here I was hoping for a less conventional failure."

That won him the ghost of a smile. Foster came in and took the cane-back chair beside the bed. Water darkened the shoulders of his jacket; the hospital heat had begun drawing from him the smell of wet wool, road mud, and engine smoke. The captain studied him.

"How are they?" the captain asked.

"Still a bunch of pains in my ass," Foster said. "Greene has the Company until you rejoin us. Donnelly's holding the 1st for him. Bradshaw took a round yesterday. Kraut .42. Word is he's going to be okay."

"Good. Greene will take good care of the boys. Shame about Bradshaw."

Foster nodded, but the nod arrived late, as though detained by heavier freight. The captain glanced from his coffee to the membrane stretched over it ~~as if it were a second thought~~, then returned to the lieutenant.

“And what,” he asked, “has followed you in here besides rain?”

Foster removed his spectacles and wiped them on the edge of his sleeve. Without the lenses, his face looked younger—too young, indecently young, as though the war had not yet finished its theft, only opened the account. For a moment, he did not answer.

“When we hit that Kraut .42. We were ordered to a complex east of the river road,” Foster said at last. “The scouts marked it first as a prison camp. Labor detail, maybe. Barracks, towers, dog runs.” He put the spectacles back on, though the glass remained faintly misted. “It wasn’t usual, sir.”

“What was it?”

Foster looked not at him but at the bedside stand and the skin on the coffee. “You smelled it before the gate. Sweet, but wrong. Like a bakery trying to hide something rotten beneath it.” His throat worked.

“We cut through the wire. There were men in striped clothes, sir. Some at the fence. Some too weak to reach it. Bodies stacked behind a shed.”

He stopped.

The captain did not rescue him from it.

“There were women,” Foster said more quietly. “Old men. All civilians. One of the sergeants tried to hand out rations, and a medic knocked the bread from his hand because too much too fast would kill them.”

“When we cleared the buildings, we found a room full of shoes. Another full of hair.” He swallowed. “I knew the Germans could kill . . .” Foster’s voice faltered, just once. “I did not know they had industrialized genocide.”

The captain tightened his grip on the bandage, maintaining pressure. It was not the wound. Or not only that. On the stand, the coffee’s skin held.

“How many?”

“I couldn’t say. Hundreds in the yard, perhaps more in the barracks.”

The captain turned his head toward the window. Beyond the wet pane, evening had begun to darken the yard; ambulance lamps moved there like censers in a procession no one had elected to join. He found, to his disgust, that what first rose in him was not rage but humiliation.

“And command?” he asked.

Foster breathed out through his nose. “That is the other part.”

“Yes,” said the captain. “I assumed there was one.”

“I was sent to the division because of the report.” Foster touched the bandage on his arm, embarrassed by needing a pretext. “Not the cut. The report. Since you’re here, Lindley had me sit in the briefing.”

“Lindley, he’s a supply guy. What’s he got to do with this?”

Foster continued. “G3 wants the advance preserved. Berlin is dissolving by the hour, they said. Every hour we lose gives the Russians another street, another square, another page in the ending. So the lead elements are to keep moving where they can. Camps are to be marked, secured as lightly as circumstances allow, and handed to rear echelons once they catch up.” Foster glanced up, as if testing the words aloud.

The captain understood at once and wished he hadn’t. He stared again at his coffee. The film had thickened while they spoke.

“As lightly as circumstances allow,” he repeated. “And they chose Lindley for the job.”

Foster’s shame deepened; it did not belong to him personally, which made it more painful to witness. “MPs where they can be spared. Medics. Engineers. Cooks. Whatever bodies are closest. Enough to hold a gate, disarm guards, keep roads clear, and move east.”

A short sound escaped the captain. It wasn’t laughter.

“To put a sentry on hell,” he said, “and drive past it.”

Foster said nothing.

“Whose language was this?”

“Division’s. The general settled it.”

The captain turned back to him fully now. The motion pulled at his abdomen; beneath the bandage, the wound complained like something alive and resentful. Let it. Pain, in that moment, felt cleaner than the ease with which sane men had evidently spoken of delay.

“And what,” he asked, “does the general imagine liberation consists of? Cutting wire? Taking photographs? Announcing to a man with typhus that he is technically free while he dies in the same bunk, only under better flags?”

“Sir—”

“No.” The captain lifted one hand. Berlin is a city. A capital. A stage. Men like generals and journalists adore stages because a stage can be entered, claimed, lit, and narrated. Those camps are not stages.”

He let the words hang there.

“They are active disasters. They do not become less so because we have finally arrived late enough to smell them.”

He leaned forward despite the wound. Heat came to his face; the edge of the room darkened for a moment, but anger kept it steady.

“A place like that is not a side errand. It is wells, kitchens, latrines, quarantine, dysentery, typhus, burial details, interpreters, perimeter security, guards trying to disappear into ditches, prisoners trying to beat those guards to death with their hands, and perhaps not being wrong. It is children with no language left but hunger. It is doctors. It is records. It is witnesses before the witnesses die.”

He pointed vaguely east, though the wall hid everything but direction and appetite.

“You do not pass such a place at speed simply because another square on the map glitters more attractively.”

The ward had grown very quiet around them now, as if listening.

Foster rested his elbows on his knees. “The argument in the room, sir, was that if the Russians take Berlin first, they write the ending.”

"The ending of what?" the captain asked. "Let them write it in red ink across every wall in Europe. A boulevard in Berlin is not dearer than a barracks of starving human beings."

He stopped because the coffee had finally irritated him beyond endurance. He lifted the cup, watched the gray membrane tremble, then set it back down untouched. Breaking it would have been too small a satisfaction.

Foster's voice, when it came, had altered. The line had already begun etching itself into him.

"The men know something has changed. They don't trust it."

"They shouldn't."

"They're quieter. Some want to shoot every guard they see. Some want to shoot any German in boots. Others march harder, as though arriving faster might make the place behind them less real."

The captain closed his eyes briefly. He saw not the camps—imagination, for once, had the decency to fail him—but the afterlife of sight in young men. How horror migrates. How it seeks employment. How quickly righteous disgust, denied witness or order, hires itself out to vengeance.

"It won't make sense in Berlin," he said. "Not there. Not anywhere. What they've seen has already entered them."

Foster nodded once. His bandaged arm lay white against the dark wool of his coat, a meager emblem of harm beside what he had carried in.

The captain went on, more quietly now, which made the words land harder. "That is precisely why those places cannot be treated as scenery on the road east. Men require order after such a sight, or else they invent their own. So do the prisoners. So does truth."

Foster looked up. "Truth, sir?"

"Yes." The captain's gaze hardened. "Secure a camp badly enough, and people keep dying after liberation. They die of delay, of infected water, of bad rations, of exposure. At the same time, we congratulate ourselves on having arrived."

He shook his head.

The lamp threw a small false moon on the coffee's surface. Foster watched it as if waiting for it to break of its own accord.

"No one in the room sounded cruel," he said.

"I know." The captain's mouth tightened. "Cruelty is easy to spot. Any private with a conscience can name it and spit. Expedience is more dangerous because it comes in with clean gloves, figures, schedules, talk of roads, trucks, alliances, and the larger objective. Some of those things are real. That is exactly why they do such harm. A lie that borrows fact travels farther."

Then, because Foster had come not merely for outrage but for use, he gave him that too.

"If the Company reaches one of those camps before proper relief does, the boys will have those bodies on their conscience, and these aren't dead Krauts we're talking about. You can't shoot your way through that trauma, Lieutenant Foster."

Foster received this without flinching. In the lenses of his spectacles, the lamplight trembled once, then steadied.

"I understand, sir."

A stretcher squealed past the door. Its shadow slid across the opposite wall and vanished.

Foster rose. The chair protested under the sudden absence of his weight.

"Sir," he said, "do you think taking Berlin will feel like victory after this?"

The captain's laugh this time held no bitterness, only fatigue and a bleak tenderness for the innocence required to ask honestly.

"At best," he said, "it will feel incomplete. At worst, indecently late."

Something in Foster's face accepted the wound of that and was, by accepting it, altered.

"I'll do my best, sir."

"Do that. And do not let Lindley or any other map worshipper come between you and those boys."

A faint smile touched Foster's mouth. "No, sir."

He turned at the door.

"Lieutenant."

"Sir?"

“Get that arm signed off before you rejoin the line. I’d rather not learn you bled to death out of professional vanity.”

The smile returned properly this time, though exhaustion dragged at it. “I’ll try to disappoint you more slowly.”

The captain remained very still.

On the bedside stand, the coffee had skinned over so completely that the surface no longer looked liquid at all. He stared at it until the thing became unbearable, then lifted the cup and touched the film with one finger. It tore at once—soundlessly, without resistance—and the dark beneath showed through.

He set the cup down again.

Outside, the rain ticked, and something like impatience began to take hold.

**HEIDELBERG
UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL**



BY THE TIME dawn reached Heidelberg University Hospital, three wards had run out of morphine.

Dr. Josef Burg learned this from a nurse before he had taken off his coat. She spoke the number in a whisper. He nodded, hung his hat on the peg outside Ward B, and stood for a moment with his hand resting on the door.

Inside, the young ones cried differently from the old.

The old bargained. They called for wives, priests, mothers long dead, and sometimes for God. The children did not bargain at all.

Burg entered.

The ward smelled of carbolic and the sour bedding of fever. Morning light fell across the iron beds in narrow bands. Outside, mist held the Neckar in a pale grip. Inside, Sister Hilde moved from cot to cot with her rosary tucked into her sleeve and her mouth set against complaint.

Burg was forty-five, though grief had made his face older in some places and strangely younger in others. The corners of his eyes were deeply scored; his hands remained precise. In his waistcoat pocket, a silver watch ticked unevenly. The lid was warped from heat.

Marta had given it to him the year Emil was born. It had been recovered from the fire, misshapen but intact.

He did not take it out in the ward.

"Third bed," Sister Hilde said quietly.

"I know."

Matthias Kröger was awake. Nine years old. Red-haired. Both legs were suspended in plaster and traction after artillery fragments had passed through bone and out again. Someone, perhaps his mother before the evacuation, had combed his hair neatly to one side.

“Morning, Herr Doktor,” Matthias whispered.

“And how is our artillery ace?”

The boy tried to smile. His mouth trembled before it found the shape.

“It bites.”

Burg lifted the chart from the foot of the bed. Fever climbing, pulse rapid, dressings changed twice in the night. The pain column had been left blank.

He looked at Sister Hilde.

She shook her head once.

“No ampoules?”

“Not for children,” she said. “The last box was signed out to Surgery during the night. They took three amputations and a burn.”

Burg looked back at Matthias. The boy watched him with that dreadful trust children have before the world teaches them economy.

“I’ll find a way to dull it,” Burg said.

He did not say how.

Matthias closed his eyes.

Burg rested two fingers against the child’s wrist, counted the pulse, and moved on before the boy could ask how.

At the nurses’ station, Frau Reiling waited with a clipboard pressed flat against her chest.

“Dr. Rüdiger wants you.”

“When?”

“Now.”

Burg took the chart from under his arm and placed it on the desk. “Tell Surgery they cannot consume the entire hospital.”

“They said the front consumes more.”

“Oh. Have they become poets?”

Frau Reiling did not smile.

Burg buttoned his coat with the hand that trembled least and walked toward the senior physician’s office.

The corridor outside Rüdiger’s door had once held potted palms. Since the war, the palms had disappeared. Their ceramic tubs remained, filled now with rolled bandages, crutches, and a

stack of empty bottles waiting for sterilization. The gold letters on the door were worn at the edges.

Dr. Rüdiger did not invite him in after the knock. He said, "Enter."

The room was too warm. A coal stove glowed red in the corner, and smoke from Rüdiger's cigarette flattened itself beneath the ceiling. Files stood in uneven towers across the desk. One folder lay open before him. Another, brown and tied with a cord, had been turned face down. Burg saw only the edge of its stamp: T4.

Sister Hilde stood near the window. Her rosary was no longer tucked away. She held it in plain sight.

"Sit," Rüdiger said.

Burg sat.

Rüdiger slid a chart across the desk. Burg knew it before he read the name.

Johansen, Friedrich. Forty-two. Sepsis following abdominal injury. Died 01:22.

Rüdiger tapped the page with one yellowed finger. "Explain this."

Burg looked at the entries. They were in his hand. He had expected questions about Johansen, only not so soon.

"The man was dying."

"That is not an explanation. That is a conclusion."

"His infection had entered the blood. His kidneys were failing. His fever had broken in the wrong direction. He was drowning in his own corruption."

Rüdiger's mouth tightened. "You discontinued the sulfonamide at 21:10."

"It was no longer treating him. It was consuming stock."

"You reduced fluids."

"They were collecting in his lungs."

"You didn't treat his pain."

"His pain was uncontrollable."

Rüdiger leaned back. The chair creaked beneath him. "And by morning, two ampoules had been transferred to Ward C."

Burg did not answer.

Sister Hilde's beads clicked once against her ring.

"I left you alone with Johansen," she said. "He was frightened. He asked whether his wife had arrived."

"She had not."

"He was awake enough to ask."

"He was awake enough to suffer."

Rüdiger crushed his cigarette into the tray and immediately reached for another. "The protocol requires a second physician for withdrawal of active treatment."

"There was no treatment left to withdraw. Only delay."

"It requires notation."

"I noted it."

"Afterward," Rüdiger said. "And incorrectly."

Burg's gaze lifted.

Rüdiger's voice did not. "You wrote that his respiration had declined before the second sedation. Sister Hilde says otherwise."

Sister Hilde closed her hand around the rosary. "When I returned, the drip had been altered. He was no longer speaking."

The stove made a small, collapsing sound.

Burg looked from one face to the other. He felt tired suddenly—though not guilty.

"He was dying badly," Burg said. "I made him die less badly."

Rüdiger stared at him.

"No approval. No witness. No family consent. A false sequence of events in the chart. That is what you made."

Burg felt heat rise into his neck. "Would you have preferred that he scream until his wife arrived to hear it?"

"I would have preferred that a physician remember he is not God."

At that, Burg almost laughed.

"God has not been making rounds here," he said.

Sister Hilde flinched.

Rüdiger removed his spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Without them, his face looked older and less certain. "Josef."

The use of his first name landed harder than the reprimand.

“We have shortages,” Rüdiger said. “Every hospital does. We have young men from the front, children from bombed streets, and older men on their last breath. We choose all day. But there are lines.”

“Lines are luxuries drawn by people not standing at the bed.”

“No,” Rüdiger said. “Lines keep us from murder.”

Burg said nothing.

“The board meets tomorrow,” Rüdiger continued. “Written statement by dawn. Until then, you will make no withdrawal of active treatment without my signature or Volkmann’s. No adjustment of sedation beyond posted comfort protocol. No transfers of medication between wards without approval.”

“Volkmann?” Burg asked.

“He is young. He can still read a rule without hearing the screams around it.”

The insult was mild. That made it worse.

Rüdiger pushed Johansen’s chart back toward him. “One more anomaly, and I will not be able to protect you.”

Burg stood.

Sister Hilde moved aside as he passed. At the door, she said softly, “He asked for his wife.”

Burg kept his hand on the latch.

“So did my son,” he said.

He left before either of them could answer.

His office had once been a linen closet. The shelves still smelled faintly of soap. Clean lab coats hung along one wall, shapeless as surrendered men. On the desk sat a framed photograph, face down, and a black notebook bound in cracked leather.

Burg did not lift the photograph.

He opened the notebook.

Case 141. Male. Terminal sepsis. Treatment noncurative. Sedation increased after respiratory distress. Death 01:22. Medication recovered for pediatric trauma.

He paused with the pen above the paper, then added: Suffering shortened. The phrase looked insufficient. He crossed it out.

He wrote instead: Waste prevented.

Then he stared at those two words until they began to accuse him. He closed the notebook and placed one palm over it, as if keeping something inside from escaping.

A knock came before he could answer himself.

Dr. Volkmann entered carrying a chart, and the anxious dignity of a man recently promoted beyond his confidence. His collar was too stiff. His cheeks were pale. He glanced first at the notebook, then away from it.

"Ward B," Volkmann said. "Herr Krüger. Meningitis. Your order discontinues sulfonamide and fluids at noon."

"Yes."

"Rüdiger said no withdrawals without countersignature."

"He said active treatment. Krüger is beyond treatment."

Volkmann opened the chart as if the paper might defend him. "His wife is coming from Karlsruhe. His daughter too."

"Then perhaps they should hurry."

The younger doctor looked up. "That is a cruel thing to say."

"It is crueler to ask a dying man to wait for witnesses."

Volkmann's mouth worked. "You also failed to sedate properly."

"Comfort protocol permits discretion."

"Not this much."

"His neck is rigid. His fever is burning through him. He cannot swallow. His eyes no longer track light. The infection has reached the brain."

"Then we keep him comfortable."

"That is what I ordered."

"No," Volkmann said, too quickly, then softer, with more fear than anger. "No, Herr Doktor. You did not."

Burg stood very still.

From the ward beyond the office came a child's cry, high and brief, cut off by a nurse's murmur. Matthias, perhaps. Or another. The hospital was full of children learning to be quiet.

"Come," Burg said.

Volkmann followed him to Ward B.

Herr Krüger lay near the window, a large man reduced by illness to the outline of one. Sweat had plastered gray hair across his forehead. His hands opened and closed on the bedsheet. Each breath made his jaw tremble. Sister Hilde stood at the foot of the bed with her lips moving silently.

Burg examined him. Pulse uneven. Fever merciless. Pupils slow. The man moaned once, a sound without language.

"See?" Volkmann whispered. "He still feels."

"Exactly."

Burg took the chart and wrote beneath his earlier order: No curative response expected. Continue comfort measures. Reserve the remaining antimicrobial stock for salvageable cases.

Volkmann stared at the line.

"You cannot write that."

"I just did."

"That is rationing by prognosis."

"That is medicine in wartime."

"No. That is judgment."

Burg handed the chart to Sister Hilde. She did not take it.

"Herr Doktor," she said, "his family—"

"Will arrive at a quieter room."

Burg heard himself. He heard the certainty in it. He also heard, beneath that certainty, a second voice keeping count.

One dying man. One suffering child. Two remaining ampules. One bed soon free. He despised the calculation. He trusted it more than pity.

He took a syringe from the tray. Volkmann stepped forward.

"Please," the younger doctor said.

Burg looked at him, surprised by the word.

For a moment, there were only the four of them: the dying man, the praying nurse, the frightened young doctor, and Burg with the instrument in his hand. Beyond the window, rain began to spot the glass.

Burg set the syringe down.

For a moment, no one moved.

Volkmann's shoulders loosened.

Then Burg reached for the drip instead and adjusted the valve with two fingers.

"Not enough to kill a healthy man," he said quietly. "Enough to let a dying one stop fighting the room."

Volkmann watched the movement of his hand. So did Sister Hilde.

Herr Krüger's breath lengthened. His fingers uncurled little by little from the sheet.

"There," Burg said. No one thanked him.

Burg went to the archives.

The basement was cold enough to make his joints ache. The records room smelled of mildew, ink, and old glue. He lit a lamp, found Johansen's file, and laid it beside the ward log. Fifteen minutes shaved from one entry. A symptom moved above an intervention. A nurse's initial was copied where a blank had been. Nothing large. Nothing that would disturb a clerk. Enough to make death appear to have chosen its hour unaided.

He had almost finished when the door opened.

Volkmann stood in the doorway.

For several seconds, neither man spoke.

Then Volkmann said, "Herr Krüger died at 11:40."

Burg kept his hand on the page. "Was he quiet?"

"That is your defense?"

"It is my question."

Volkmann stepped into the room. "His wife arrived at midnight."

Burg looked down.

"She sat beside the bed and kept touching his hand as if she might warm him backward," Volkmann said. "His daughter asked whether he had spoken. Sister Hilde lied."

Burg closed the file.

Volkmann glanced at the ink bottle, the open log, the altered sequence.

"You are changing Johansen's chart."

"I am correcting ambiguity."

“You are hiding what you did.”

“Yes.”

The admission struck the younger doctor harder than denial would have.

“Why?”

“To keep timid men from undoing necessary mercy.”

“Mercy does not need a forged witness.”

“Mercy often needs protection from procedure.”

Volkmann came closer. His face had gone white around the mouth. “Do you hear yourself?”

“All day.”

“You stopped Krüger’s treatment because you believed he would die anyway. You increased sedation because you believed his pain was unnecessary. You moved medicine to another ward because you believed someone else could be saved. Perhaps you were right. Perhaps you were even kind. But then you came down here in the dark to lie about it.”

Burg felt the weight of the words. He arranged his face until none of it showed.

“The dead do not benefit from accuracy,” he said quietly.

“The living do.”

Burg closed the logbook. “Be careful, Volkmann.”

The younger man swallowed.

“Is that a threat?”

“It is advice. You are building a career in a hospital without morphine. Learn the cost of purity before you spend it publicly.”

Volkmann looked at him with something worse than fear.

“Your notebook,” he said, “is not a conscience. It is a place to put one, so you do not have to carry it.”

He turned and left.

Burg waited until the footsteps had gone. Only then did he realize his right hand was trembling. He looked at the altered file, then at the lamp flame moving gently in the draft.

In the morning, he submitted his written statement to Frau Reiling. She accepted it without looking at him.

“The board convenes in the conservatory,” she said.

“Plants require witnesses now?”

“There are no plants left.”

The conservatory had been stripped for space months before. Where orange trees once stood, crutches and broken wheelchairs gleamed beneath the glass roof. Rain ticked overhead. Eight men sat behind a long table. Rüdiger was among them, his face drawn. Dr. Weigl chaired the proceedings, *pince-nez* shining at the end of his nose. Sister Hilde sat to one side. Volkmann sat behind her and did not look at Burg.

A single chair had been placed before the table. Lower than the others.

Burg sat.

Weigl opened a folder. “Dr. Josef Burg. This is an internal disciplinary review concerning unauthorized alterations of patient treatment, falsification of records, and misuse of controlled medication.”

“Misuse,” Burg repeated.

Weigl looked over the rims of his spectacles. “You will have time to respond.”

Weigl read from the papers. “Patient Johansen. Terminal sepsis. You discontinued sulfonamide therapy, reduced fluids, and increased sedation without second-physician approval. Medication subsequently appeared in Ward C.”

“Correct.”

A faint movement passed through the men at the table.

Weigl continued. “Patient Krüger. Meningitis. You ordered cessation of antimicrobial therapy, reduction of fluids, and increased sedation after being expressly instructed not to make such changes without countersignature.”

“Correct.”

“Patient Vogel. Pulmonary infection. Similar pattern two weeks prior. Patient Reimann. Burn trauma. Morphine depletion was noted after your overnight supervision. In three of these cases, chart entries were made or amended after death.”

Burg folded his hands in his lap.

Weigl set down the paper. “Do you dispute any of that?”

“No.”

Rüdiger closed his eyes briefly.

Weigl’s voice became colder for its effort at restraint. “Then explain it.”

Burg looked past them to the rain on the glass roof.

“We have children with traumatic injuries receiving no analgesia. We have surgical patients screaming through dressing changes. We have men from the front whose wounds can be treated if fever is kept down and infection is checked early. And we have terminal patients consuming medicines that no longer cure them.”

“Consuming,” Weigl said.

“Yes.”

“They are patients, not furnaces.”

“They are bodies in agony,” Burg said. “Bodies that medicine has failed. If death is certain and suffering extreme, prolongation becomes vanity.”

Sister Hilde made the sign of the cross.

Weigl noticed. So did Burg.

“And who decides certainty?” Weigl asked.

“A physician.”

“A physician. Not you alone.”

“Committees do not stand beside the bed at midnight.”

“No. Nurses do. Families do. Junior physicians do. You stood among them and decided their presence was an inconvenience.”

Burg leaned forward. “I decided that watching a man choke on his own infection served no moral purpose.”

“You also decided his medication would better serve another patient.”

“Yes.”

“At what point did compassion become inventory?”

Burg did not answer at once.

In his mind, Matthias whispered, “It bites.” Herr Krüger’s wife touched a cooling hand. Johansen asked for a woman who had not arrived. Marta sang behind a door that Burg could not open. Emil coughed once, then again, and then the fire took the air.

“At the point where inventory became the condition of compassion,” Burg said.

The silence afterward was complete.

Weigl lifted another sheet. “Your private notes were provided to this board.”

Burg stared, for the first time, at Volkmann.

The younger doctor’s face tightened but did not retreat.

Weigl read, “‘Case 141. Terminal sepsis. Suffering shortened. Waste prevented.’ You crossed out the first phrase and kept the second.”

Burg felt the sentence enter the room and stand there.

Weigl turned a page. “You track time to death after sedation. Temperature decline. Respiratory interval. Medication recovered. These are not the notes of a doctor comforting the dying. They are the notes of a man studying how they die.”

“Observation is not a crime.”

“No,” Weigl said. “But you are beginning to mistake death for a research assistant.”

Burg’s hands tightened.

Rüdiger spoke at last. His voice was rough. “Josef, your tragedy cut all of us. We know what the fire took from you.”

Burg looked at him then.

“You know nothing of it.”

“Perhaps not,” Rüdiger said. “But grief does not grant jurisdiction over other men’s final hours.”

Burg felt something in him close. Not violently. Quietly, like a door well-made.

Weigl gathered the papers into a neat stack.

“Effective immediately, you are relieved of clinical duties at Heidelberg University Hospital. Your hospital privileges are revoked pending review by the medical association. Your housing will be reassigned by the end of the week. You will surrender keys, prescription authority, and ward access to Frau Reiling before departure.”

For a moment, the words seemed spoken in another language.

Burg stood.

“Where shall I go?”

No one answered.

Then Weigl said, “A man of your education will manage.”

Burg almost smiled. Education. As if books could prescribe bread, as if anatomy could unlock a door.

At the threshold, Rüdiger called after him.

“Josef.”

Burg stopped.

Rüdiger’s face had lost its authority. Only pity remained. “Do not let the world convince you this was courage.”

Burg left without replying.

He went first to Ward C.

No one stopped him; news traveled quickly in hospitals, but not always quickly enough to beat a determined man down a corridor.

Matthias slept. His face was damp but no longer clenched. Beside the bed, Sister Hilde had written a new entry in the chart. Half an ampoule administered at dawn. Pain reduced. Patient resting.

Burg stood over the boy. The child’s breathing was shallow but even. One hand lay outside the blanket, small and freckled, the nails bitten ragged.

For one weak instant, Burg felt vindicated.

Then Matthias opened his eyes.

“It doesn’t bite now,” the boy whispered.

Burg bent toward him. “Good.”

“Are you leaving?”

Children, Burg thought, hear what adults bury under doors.

“For a little while.”

“Will you come back?”

Burg touched the boy’s forehead. Fever was still there. Life was still there.

“If I can.”

Matthias seemed to accept this. He closed his eyes again.

Burg remained until Sister Hilde appeared at the end of the ward.

“You are not permitted to be here,” she said.

"I know."

"Then go."

Her voice broke on the last word. That surprised him. He had mistaken her anger for hatred. It was not. It was grief defending a boundary.

He nodded once and left the ward.

His room in the hospital residence overlooked the rear courtyard, where laundry lines hung empty between two sycamores. He packed with the discipline of a man preparing an operating table. Textbooks first. Two shirts. Razors. A pair of cufflinks. The photograph that had survived because it had been in his desk at the hospital on the night Marta and Emil died. The black notebook. The warped pocket watch.

He placed the photograph face up on the bed.

Marta sat in a garden chair, one hand lifted to shade her eyes. Emil stood beside her in a cap too large for him, holding a wooden airplane by one wing. Both of them were laughing at someone outside the frame. At Burg, perhaps. He could not remember what he had said to make them laugh. This failure of memory frightened him more than the dead themselves.

He packed the photograph between two shirts.

That night, sleep refused him.

Rain moved over the roof in fits. Somewhere in the hospital, a woman cried out, then was hushed. Burg sat at the desk with the black notebook open.

He wrote: Heidelberg mistakes hesitation for ethics. Then he crossed it out.

He wrote: Death, when inevitable, may be governed. He did not cross that out.

Below it, after a long pause, he added, "Resources restored to the ward." Matthias relieved.

The sentence steadied him. It also disturbed him. He read it twice and closed the book.

At sunrise, a porter knocked and handed him an envelope.

The paper was heavy. The seal bore an eagle and a staff entwined by a serpent. Burg turned it over before opening it, already

aware that certain letters were not invitations but doors locking behind a man.

Inside was Reich Chancellery letterhead.

Herr Dr. Burg,

Your recent work on palliative allocation and terminal treatment has come to my attention. Your thesis is bold, timely, and scientifically urgent. Germany requires physicians capable of understanding suffering not as sentiment, but as a problem of command.

You are invited to Berlin for evaluation at SS Medical Headquarters.

Dr. Karl Brandt

Below the typed signature, in a finer hand, someone had written: To understand suffering is to command the human spirit.

Burg stood very still.

He knew Brandt's name. Every hospital knew it. His name traveled ahead of gray buses and returned behind closed files. Children who had never coughed died of "pneumonia." Older women vanished into clinics with clean windows. The Reich called it mercy. Priests called it murder when they dared. Administrators called it policy. Doctors, depending on ambition, called it an opportunity.

Burg read the letter again.

He should have felt fear. Instead, to his shame, he felt recognized.

By noon, his office had been emptied. Frau Reiling accepted his keys without looking at him.

"Forwarding address?" she asked.

"Berlin."

Her pen hesitated. "Of course."

Outside, the rain had thinned to a cold mist. Burg walked through the hospital gate carrying one suitcase, the black notebook pressed inside his coat, and Brandt's letter folded alongside the watch that had survived the fire.

**FIELD HOSPITAL,
SCHESSLITZ**



SABINA HAD REAPPEARED in front of the captain's bed without fanfare, as though she had materialized from the plaster dust. She did not speak. She merely set the thick, cloth-bound volume beside the bottle of phenobarbital tablets and departed once more, her absence now louder than the ward.

"Hell's bedtime story," the captain muttered.

When supper arrived—gray stew ladled into a dented tin—the captain used the book as a tray prop and tried to keep both supports from collapsing. Halfway through the bowl, he flipped to the novel's first page and ran his fingers over the letters I.A. scrawled on the inside of the cover.

The captain read: *Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov was the third son . . .* He tasted each syllable. As he read, hours thinned. Nurses dimmed kerosene lamps. The ward fell into that half-dark peculiar to military hospitals: neither day nor night.

The captain read until the words blurred.

When he finally lost the battle with his eyelids, he closed the book and rested it on his chest. He drifted, neither asleep nor alert, into the borderland where conscience whispers louder than dreams.

He saw the Ardennes again.

Snow corrugated by shell bursts; pine needles black against a blizzard sky; the metallic breath of frost inside his mask. He watched a blond, German boy, maybe sixteen, drop his rifle, hands up, blue fingers trembling. "Don't shoot," the boy said in accented English. In the dream, the captain's platoon sergeant fired anyway, two rounds to the lung. The boy buckled. Blood threaded through powder snow.

"Orders, sir," the sergeant had said, lowering his M1.

Now the captain, half-dreaming, reached to staunch the

phantom wound, but his hands found only hospital sheets. He jolted awake, sweat cooling fast in the night air.

A lamp clicked on. Sabina stood beside the bed with a syringe. "Nightmare?" she asked.

"Closer to reality than I wished," he said, forcing calm.

"Your fever's low, but Major Claxton ordered another shot of penicillin. It won't hurt."

"These aren't fever dreams, nurse," he said, baring his arm.

She swabbed the skin. "Have you started the book?"

"Got past the family tree." He tried a smile. "All those patronymics could repulse an armored division."

Her needle slid in. "You'll learn to love them."

"Is that an order, nurse?"

"A wager." She pressed cotton to the puncture. "If you remain unmoved, I'll concede defeat and fetch the Brothers." She packed her kit. Before leaving, she lowered the lamp wick, letting shadows reclaim the corner. "Sleep if you can. The world won't end before morning."

"Would it be kinder if it did?" he said.

She paused at the curtain. "I've learned during my time on the ward that a hero's death is much easier than his survival. Your war is not yet over, Captain. It's just beginning." And she was gone.

He did not sleep. Instead, he reopened the book, traced each line with the diligence of a monk decanting scripture.

After a while, the captain closed the book, his pulse hammering. Somewhere in his mind, the Ardennes' snow kept turning pink.

At 2:30 a.m., the orderly dimmed the lanterns to navy dusk. Rain began, soft at first, then drumming on the tin roof like distant typewriters chronicling fresh obituaries. He welcomed the noise; it drowned the heartbeats.

Yet thoughts seeped.

When he could bear it no longer, the captain reached for the Bible on his stand. Its leather felt cool, unassuming. He opened to the Psalms, searching for a verse he once loved to see how it felt.

Instead, he found the margin note of a previous patient: "*God is either unwilling or unable; choose your disappointment.*"

The captain laughed, a hoarse bark, then closed the book again. Moments later, the curtain rustled. Chaplain Pierson, still in boots and a helmet liner, stepped inside bearing a tin mug.

"I heard you were awake, Captain. Can't rest?"

"Can't decide whether to pray or prosecute," the captain said.

Pierson offered the mug, lukewarm chicory. "Both take stamina."

The captain sipped. Rain drilled harder.

"We have unfinished business, Chaplin. You never answered me. How does God feel about this war?"

The chaplain sighed. "There's bad everywhere, Captain. War means less than the motive behind it—than what's in your heart."

The captain gestured at his abdomen. "My heart doesn't matter so much. Bullets bore no motives but velocity. The same with soldiers."

Pierson sat on the footlocker. "Velocity isn't a motive; it's a consequence. And you are a captain, not merely a soldier. Listen, I can't absolve your nightmares, Captain, only remind you they prove your soul isn't past feeling."

"Feels more like rot than evidence."

"That rot can compost into wisdom if you keep turning the soil." Pierson touched the edge of the book. "Find anything useful?"

"Only a mirror polished with Russian misery." He flipped the book shut.

"A mirror? That's because you're honest with yourself. God has room for honest men." The priest rose. "You'll meet Alyosha soon; he argues for hope."

"I've met him. Alyosha," the captain allowed a small smile. "He seems a lot like a nurse with lilac on her gloves."

Pierson offered a tired smile, blessed him, and withdrew into the ward's gloaming.

Near dawn, the captain could bear the bed no longer. Three days of sulfa and a plasma transfusion had lifted him from stretcher to cane use. He swung his legs over the side. The wound howled, his vision speckled black, but he managed to stand, clutching the pole of his IV rack like a pilgrim with a staff.

Step by ragged step, he reached the open window Sabina had earlier tamed. The rain had stalled; clouds frayed, revealing a sky the color of unspent gunpowder.

The captain inhaled the chilled air until pain blurred into a species of clarity. In the courtyard below, stretchers waited under tarps, dew-pearled. He returned to bed, slid Karamazov beneath his pillow like contraband grace, and finally, body exhausted, mind taut as wire, closed his eyes at last.