

# Prologue

It's winter in Canada, in Toronto, where I've been living for the past twenty years since my marriage ended. The snow is piling up outside my door, and I know I won't venture out for a few days. I will become even more melancholic, and perhaps I'll drink a little too much gin. But who will really care? My sister Olga will phone tomorrow to ask how I am, and I will tell her I'm fine. She'll choose to believe me because she's much more interested in her grandchildren these days than in me.

In Shanghai, where I grew up, the winters were miserable, damp and cold. I learned to hate the rain even more than the snow. In Malaya, where I lived with my husband on a rubber plantation, the winters were as hot and sunny as the summers. The climate suited me fairly well, but in the end I could no longer endure the monotony or the marriage. I chose to come to Canada, where Olga and Jean Paul had immigrated a year after the birth of their second child. By that time both Papa and Mother were gone, both too soon and within a year of each other. Now that I've passed my sixtieth birthday, I think about the dead more than I think about the living. Sometimes this frightens me and I dump all the gin down the sink and swear I won't drink again. But nothing changes, and I buy another bottle to ease the pain and the guilt.

Nowadays I'm preoccupied with the past. When I think back on myself as a young woman, I'm surprised at how naïve I was, but I realize it was a wilful naïveté, just another way of maintaining the pretence of my life. I was obsessed with keeping it interesting and exciting. But where did that desperation come from? The more I pose the question these days, the more I begin to understand that the problem had more to do with my own character than with any of the circumstances surrounding me. I had a good family that loved me. I lived in a place that was often dangerous, yet I felt safe and secure within my world. I was educated and read books. Why did I become so contrary?

Today I marvel at how I could observe and participate in one kind of life and yet follow a completely different narrative in my mind. I insisted on telling the story the way I wanted it to be, and then I made myself believe it. Nobody could persuade me that the other version—the one they saw—was real. Especially not Olga or my parents. Not even Lily, when she tried. Annette, experienced in the ways of the world, never tried. She kept telling her story, "*l'histoire de ma vie*", the way she wanted to hear it. But in Annette's case I could understand. There were circumstances. Circumstances that could lead one to want to alter, or soften, the harsher aspects of the narrative. In my case there were none. At least, not at first.

But everything changed after Daniel's murder. Because I was the one who identified his body, I got to see the ugly reality of his death up close. That reality reduced the beauty of his short life to the single image of a bloated corpse on a metal table. It is an

image that can still wake me in the middle of the night, gasping for air. I feel responsible, even though I didn't fire the gun that put those bullets in his heart. Is the person who pulled the trigger the only one who is culpable? Surely I must bear some of the burden of guilt. I was, after all, the one who set the whole thing in motion.

Do we ever really forget? The dictionary says that to forget means not to remember, to cease thinking about. I forget. I have forgotten. But is forgetting an absolute? Or does memory simply drift away, evaporating like fog? Is there nothing that is active or aggressive about forgetting, no tossing away, no burning up the past so that only the ashes remain?

Even though I have tried to forget the events of 1927, especially as they happened to me and to my friends, I find myself remembering those events as if they happened yesterday. Shanghai and the smell of death and peonies. The stench was at once so harsh and acrid that I feel a bitterness burning my nose, even after thirty years. At the same time, there was a fragrance so sweet and delicious, I want to bury my face in it and inhale its loveliness again. To remember Shanghai is to remember my life between 1906 and 1927, to remember my childhood and growing up, and to remember Lily and Annette and Daniel.

Many things happened to the world in 1927. In Shanghai, there was turmoil and revolution. Then Daniel was murdered, and I left Shanghai forever.

Now, Lily's letter has brought it all back to me with such clarity. She says she's coming to Toronto and asks if she can stay with me for a few days when she arrives. Her youngest brother, the one we always called Number Three Brother, has sponsored her. I'm surprised to hear that he wants her to live with him and look after his grandchildren. I would have thought she'd bring too much bad luck, but maybe he's not as superstitious as he used to be. I wonder if we will talk about Daniel when she gets here. I wonder if she will finally tell me what really happened between them.

In the meantime, until she comes, I'll drink another bottle of gin and try again to put the puzzle together. As always, I'll go back to the beginning.

Shanghai, China  
1906

Chapter One

They stood at the rail of the ship as it sailed up the Yangtze River and into the Whangpoo River toward the harbour of Shanghai. They were an attractive family, Sergei, Katarina, and their two daughters, Olga and Tatiana, and obviously a family of means. Sergei, a man of medium build, was handsome and well groomed even after the long ocean voyage. His dark brown hair had a natural wave and was carefully combed, as was his moustache and small, neatly trimmed beard. People often commented on his resemblance to the Tsar, to which he would reply, "It is the Tsar who bears a resemblance to me." In truth, they were related, although Sergei didn't always publicly lay claim to the relationship, for he disagreed with many of the Tsar's misguided policies.

Sergei's wife Katarina was nearly as tall as him and slender as a stalk of wheat. She was blonde and ivory-skinned and, unlike her husband, Katarina looked as if she had endured a long, hard sea voyage. Her clothes were wrinkled as if she had slept in them, although she hadn't; and her expression was uneasy, as if she might be seasick, which she wasn't.

Her eldest daughter Olga, who was nearly eleven, kept her eyes fixed on their destination, her expression serious but not fearful, curious but not impatient. She was shorter than her mother by several inches, and she stood very straight, possibly in an attempt to appear taller. She resembled her father more than her mother, although she had dark curly hair, tangled and unruly, which she had unsuccessfully attempted to stuff into a dark blue velvet cap.

Her sister Tatiana, younger by less than two years, was as different from Olga as two sisters could be. She was already an inch taller and had her mother's slender build. Her hair was blonde with soft waves like her father's, and her eyes were as blue as cornflowers. They were open wide with anticipation, filled with an eagerness her sister would not express, her mother did not feel, and her father revealed only in a smile and a wildly beating heart.

As they approached the harbour and the Bund, the area by the Whangpoo that had been rebuilt after a fire in 1894, it gradually came to life before their eyes. All kinds of junks and sampans floated shoulder to shoulder on the riverfront, bobbing and jostling each other like restless children forced to sleep in the same bed. The Relnikov family would later learn that people lived their entire lives on these vessels, often with as many as three generations living and working together on a junk or a sampan in this floating neighbourhood. Some of them survived by fishing, others transported goods along the river, either to sell them or to deliver them to the many warehouses that lined the wharf. Women gave birth on the boats and raised their children to live the very same life, the only life they knew.

The Bund was a place of constant motion, both in the muddy water and on the wide, equally muddy embankment, where rickshaws and pedicabs cut each other off in the scuttle to deliver their cargo, human and otherwise. Clattering sounds gradually increased in volume as the ship drew nearer. The clatter of wooden wheels hitting stones; of cases and trunks hitting the ground as they were unloaded from wagons or handcarts; of voices shouting in Chinese, a sound the Russian family's ears would eventually adjust to but never understand, except in the most rudimentary way. It was

the clatter of the marketplace, of Chinese commerce, of life in a city that, as they would also learn, never slept.

They had come from Russia at the instigation of Sergei, who had one foot in the past and one foot in the future. How could he be otherwise? He claimed descent from Peter the Great, the tsar who had tried to bring Russia into the modern world. Because he was distantly related to Russian royalty, both of Sergei's daughters had been named after Romanov princesses. Olga had been named for the Tsar's first daughter, who had been born just weeks before her in 1895. Sergei's second daughter, called Tatiana after the second royal daughter, was born on the same day as her namesake, June 10, 1897. They could not have known that both Romanov princesses, along with their two sisters, one brother and both parents, would be imprisoned and slaughtered by Bolshevik revolutionaries two decades later in the summer of 1918. Sergei's decision to leave Russia in 1906 had been prophetic, but even he could not have imagined what was to come.

Sergei never missed an opportunity to quote his favourite author, Tolstoy. It was Tolstoy who said that happy families are all alike and every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. The Relnikovs were a happy family, so they must have been much like other happy families. Katarina was a classically trained singer who taught her daughters to appreciate music and art. She spoke French to them because it was the language of nobility. They had lived a charmed life in Russia and believed they were special, even if they were just another happy family. It had been a life filled with family and servants and land, lots of land, belonging to Sergei's family for generations. There were treasures as well, art and books, jewellery and antiques, silver serving dishes and candlesticks, fine china rimmed with gold, crystal heavy with the weight of lead, clear and sparkling like diamonds in the sunlight. Most of it they left behind, as if not truly believing they'd never see it again. Nobody who comes from such splendour easily grasps the concept of never. Besides, it did not all belong to them. There were brothers and uncles and cousins who also had claims to the Relnikov wealth.

Things had changed, however, for the Relnikovs after the Revolution of 1905, when the peasant workers had revolted and violence had entered their lives. Russia's war with Japan over Manchuria the previous year had proved disastrous. After "Bloody Sunday", when a crowd of workers that had assembled in front of the Winter Palace to petition the Tsar was fired on by soldiers, Nicholas, whom Sergei called Nicky, signed a manifesto promising the people representative government and even set up an elected Duma, but he would soon take back much of what he promised. No more representative government. No more civil liberties. When agitators began inciting the peasants to claim the land that was rightfully theirs, the Relnikovs began to fear for their safety. Sergei was a farseeing man, and by 1906, he knew their future was not in Russia.

In 1906, there were already a number of imposing buildings lining the far side of the Bund, mostly banks built of stone. They stood in stately contrast to the hustle-bustle of human activity on the muddy avenue. It had been just over sixty years since the Treaty

of Nanking had been signed in 1842 between the British and Chinese, which had opened up the so-called Treaty Ports to foreign trade. The treaty allowed British merchants and their families to live on Chinese soil as if it were a little patch of Britain, a self-governing International Settlement that maintained its own police force, laws and courts. Soon the French and the Americans also came to participate in this unique social experiment that lasted for nearly a century. It was a capitalist paradise like no other. Sergei Relnikov was not the only one to catch the fever that turned so many Europeans into "Shanghaiers".

He had heard about exciting things happening in Shanghai, China, where the British, the French and the Americans were investing heavily in the future, but at the same time China was also entering a period of revolution. The Chinese were attempting to define their own nationalism in response to the growing foreign presence in their country. Sergei refused to acknowledge the parallels between China and Russia, and this time he quoted Confucius to back up his position: "By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart." He dismissed the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 as the work of amateurs.

"They're killing missionaries," he said, "and who can blame them? Those people want to steal the hearts and minds of the Chinese. That's a terrible thing. It's good for the country to engage in trade and commerce with foreigners. Leave God out of it." Sergei had heard of Dr. Sun Yat-sen and believed he had a plan for democracy in China that would work. "Russia is in chaos," he told Katarina. "She is going backwards. China is on a path to the future."

And so they arrived in Shanghai in 1906 to begin a new life. Sergei went into business and began manufacturing and selling bicycles and bicycle parts. He knew enough about business to know that the best way to make money, anywhere, was to sell a product that people either needed or wanted, or thought they needed or wanted. He recognized that the bicycle was a valuable commodity in that part of the world, and that people would pay for a bicycle and, later, would pay for the parts they needed to fix their bicycle and keep it going.

The Relnikovs were still a happy family, but Katarina's happiness was no longer as great. To take such a woman out of Russia, even a Russia that was becoming a frightening monster, and to move her to a place as far away and foreign as China, was to take a flower out of a garden full of beautiful flowers and put it in a pot of dirt. Katarina's garden was her family of seven sisters and brothers, cousins and second cousins, cousins once and twice removed, aunts and uncles, and even some great-aunts and great-uncles. Her garden was as vast as Russia, and its roots went deep. It had nourished her and renewed her, and she had woken up every morning with a hundred things to do. In Shanghai her world was much smaller. It consisted of Sergei, Olga and Tatiana. Even though the Relnikovs eventually acquired a social circle in Shanghai, it did not make up for Katarina's loss.

Tatiana was especially saddened by her mother's unhappiness. She would one day come to realize that her mother had made the best of her new and unwanted life in Shanghai. But what does a child know of her mother's unhappiness? For Olga and Tatiana,

Shanghai was a beginning, the future their father had promised them. They could still make a game of life. They cried when they said goodbye to friends and cousins, but they had no concept of forever. Far away meant nothing to them. In Russia, everything was big and far away. They thought everybody would come and visit, just like before. Sergei had painted such a vibrant picture of the future for them in the months before they left that they thought they were going to the most exciting place in the world. Who wouldn't want to go to China?

To Tatiana, with her nine-year-old eyes, Shanghai was an adventure. If she saw the stinking poverty and the filth of dead rats and human excrement, she turned her head and looked elsewhere, at the hustle of the marketplace and the single-minded activity of pyjama-clad men pulling exotic ladies in rickshaws. If the buildings were black from the dirt and smoke of charcoal fires, if the paint was peeling and the wood was splitting, she didn't see it. Her eyes focused on the rich, jewel-coloured silks that rushed by in those ubiquitous rickshaws; she saw the yellow and pink of flowers and the orange and green of vegetables in the market stalls. Tatiana wanted Shanghai to be beautiful. She willed it to be beautiful. If not for her own sake, then certainly for her mother's.

From the moment they had stepped off the steamship in Shanghai harbour, Katarina's face had become a mask. For her, the city was a dung heap, the end of nearly everything. She recoiled at the stench from pools of urine and piles of excrement, rotting vegetables and, worse, the not so occasional rotting corpse of a dog or an unwanted baby, and she recoiled at the incessant noise and activity that filled the harbour area and the city. It was as if she froze on the spot, her muscles refusing to move. Sergei had to take her by the arm and pull her along. Her expressionless face refused to reveal the intense jumble of emotions she must have been feeling.

There was nothing about Shanghai that could ease the pain of leaving her beloved home. Katarina no longer sang when she performed a task. Her family rarely heard her laugh, and they occasionally heard her cry, but only when she thought they weren't listening. Tatiana prayed every night that her mother would be happy and yet, even then, with her unformed emotions and her lack of experience, she knew it was futile. Deep in her heart, Tatiana felt an ache whenever she looked at her mother's blank, unchanging expression.

Sergei, on the other hand, refused to be anything but cheerful and positive. He was determined to succeed in China as a businessman. The country was ready, he said, to become a powerful and wealthy nation. The government was instituting reforms in education, sending young men versed only in Chinese classical literature and calligraphy to Japan to learn the ways of the world. If he knew about the young Chinese revolutionary students who were studying the writings of Marx and admired the Russian Narodniks who espoused violence and anarchism, he said nothing. If he encountered merchants who wanted to rid China of foreign capitalists and goods, he never spoke about it. He believed Dr. Sun Yat-sen wanted to oust the Manchus and establish democracy. When the infant Pu-yi succeeded the hated Dowager Empress in 1908, Sergei said that the doors to the new China were opening, that the monarchy was on its last legs. The revolution that was underway could only bring enlightenment and

prosperity. China was not about politics, he said, it was about business and commerce. All the men Sergei knew in Shanghai wanted either to get rich or to stay rich.

“Life consists in penetrating the unknown, and fashioning our actions in accord with the new knowledge thus acquired,” he said, quoting Tolstoy once again. Even though Olga and Tatiana loved their irrepressible father, there were times when they looked at each other and rolled their eyes. Usually when he quoted Tolstoy for the umpteenth time in a day.

“Nothing is ever accomplished by writers and poets,” said Olga in a world-weary tone. By the time she was eleven, Olga considered herself quite adult and therefore wise.

“Who said that?” her father asked, arching his eyebrow suspiciously.

“I did,” said Olga.

Sergei laughed, which made Tatiana giggle, although she wasn’t sure why. “I’ve spawned a philosopher,” he said. “And what’s worse, a female philosopher. ‘Woman is more impressionable than man. Therefore in the Golden Age they were better than men. Now they are worse.’ That’s what Tolstoy said about women philosophers, and now I understand why.”

“Oh, Papa,” said Olga. “You’re impossible.”

“It is by those who have suffered that the world has been advanced.’ When you have suffered enough, Olushka, then perhaps you’ll do something worthwhile. I am only trying to contribute to your future greatness.”

“I don’t want to be great,” said Olga, importantly. “I only want to be happy.”

“Ah,” said her father. “Happiness can be even more elusive than greatness, Olushka. Our greatness is judged by others, whereas happiness we judge for ourselves. And who do you think is harder to please?” Olga frowned but didn’t answer. Sergei laughed, and she knew he must be teasing her. “As your father,” he said, kissing the top of her head, “I shall do everything in my power to bring about your happiness.” Satisfied, Olga curtsied and said, “Thank you, Papa.”

“Papa,” Tatiana said, lines of worry creasing her young forehead, “do you think Mother is suffering?”

Sergei’s expression changed, and he looked at her sadly. “Yes, Tatushka, I think she’s suffering. But her suffering is not the kind I can fix like a bicycle.”

“She wants to go home, I think.”

“This is our home now, Tatushka. We can’t go back to Russia.”

“I wish there was something I could do,” she said. She wanted so badly to be able to fix whatever was wrong with her mother so they could be a happy family again.

“So do I, my child. So do I.”