

**WHITE
GARDENIA**

BELINDA ALEXANDRA

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

ONE

Harbin, China

We Russians believe that if you knock a knife from the table to the floor, a male visitor will come, and if a bird flies into the room, the death of someone close to you is at hand. Both these events occurred in 1945, around my thirteenth birthday, but there had been no omens of dropped knives or stray birds to warn me.

The General appeared on the tenth day after my father's death. My mother and I were busy removing the black silk that had been draped over the mirrors and icons for the nine days of mourning. My memory of my mother on that day has never dimmed. Her ivory skin framed by wisps of dark hair, the pearl studs in her fleshy earlobes, and her fiery amber eyes pieced together into a sharply focused photograph before me: my mother, a widow at thirty-three.

I recall her thin fingers folding the dark material with a languidness that was not usual. But then we were both shell-shocked by loss. When my father had set out on the morning of his doom, his eyes shining and his lips brushing my cheeks with parting kisses, I had no anticipation that my next view of him would be in a heavy oak coffin, his eyes closed and his waxen face remote in death. The lower part of the casket remained

shut to hide the legs that had been mutilated in the twisted wreck of the car.

The night my father's body was laid out in the parlour, white candles on either side of the coffin, my mother bolted the garage doors shut and fastened them with a chain and padlock. I watched her from my bedroom window as she paced back and forth in front of the garage, her lips moving in a silent incantation. Every so often she would stop and push her hair back over her ears as if she were listening for something, but then she would shake her head and continue her pacing. The next morning I slipped out to look at the lock and chain. I understood what she had done. She had clasped shut the garage doors the way we would have clasped onto my father if we had known that to let him drive into the lashing rain would be to let him go forever.



In the days following the accident our grief was diverted by a constant rotation of visits from our Russian and Chinese friends. They arrived and left hourly, by foot or by rickshaw, leaving their neighbouring farms or city houses to fill our home with the aroma of roasted chicken and the murmur of condolences. Those from the land came laden with gifts of bread and cake or the field flowers that had survived Harbin's early frosts, while those from the city brought ivory and silk, a polite way of giving us money, for without my father, my mother and I faced hard times ahead.

Then there was the burial. The priest, craggy and knotted like an old tree, traced the sign of the cross in the chilly air before the casket was nailed shut. The thick-shouldered Russian men jabbed their spades into the dirt, dropping frozen clods of earth into the grave. They worked hard with set jaws and downcast eyes, sweat slipping from their faces, either out of respect for my father or to win the admiration of his beautiful widow. All the while our Chinese neighbours kept

their respectful distance outside the cemetery gate, sympathetic but suspicious of our custom of burying our loved ones in the ground and abandoning them to the mercy of the elements.

Afterwards the funeral party returned to our home, a wooden house my father had built with his own hands after fleeing Russia and the Revolution. We sat down to a wake of semolina cakes and tea served from a samovar. The house had originally been a simple pitched-roof bungalow with stove pipes sticking out from the eaves, but when my father married my mother he built six more rooms and a second storey and filled them with lacquered cupboards, antique chairs and tapestries. He carved ornate window frames, erected a fat chimney and painted the walls the buttercup yellow of the dead Tsar's summer palace. Men like my father made Harbin what it was: a Chinese city full of displaced Russian nobility. People who attempted to recreate the world they had lost with ice sculptures and winter balls.

When our guests had said all that could be said, I followed behind my mother to see them off at the door. While they were putting on their coats and hats I spotted my ice skates hanging on a peg in the front entrance. The left blade was loose and I remembered that my father had intended to fix it before the winter. The numbness of the past few days gave way to a pain so sharp that it hurt my ribs and made my stomach churn. I squeezed my eyes shut against it. I saw a blue sky race towards me and a thin winter sun shining on ice. The memory of the year before came back to me. The solid Songhua River; the cheerful cries of the children struggling to stay upright on their skates; the young lovers gliding in pairs; the old people shuffling around in the centre, peering for fish through the sections where the ice was thin.

My father lifted me high on his shoulder, his blades scraping against the surface with the added weight. The sky became a blur of aqua and white. I was dizzy with laughter.

'Put me down, Papa,' I said, grinning into his blue eyes. 'I want to show you something.'

He set me down but didn't let me go until he was sure that I had my balance. I watched for a clearing and skated out into it, lifting one leg off the ice and spinning like a marionette.

'*Harashó! Harashó!*' My father clapped. He rubbed his gloved hand over his face and smiled so widely that his laugh lines seemed to come to life. My father was much older than my mother, having completed his university studies the year she was born. He had been one of the youngest colonels in the White Army and somehow, many years later, his gestures had remained a mix of youthful enthusiasm and military precision.

He held out his hands so I could skate to him, but I wanted to show off again. I pushed myself out further and started to turn, but my blade hit a bump and my foot twisted under me. I smacked against the ice on my hip and knocked the wind out of my lungs.

My father was at my side in an instant. He picked me up and skated with me in his arms to the riverbank. He set me down on a fallen tree trunk and ran his hands over my shoulders and ribs before slipping off the damaged boot.

'No broken bones,' he said, moving my foot between his palms. The air was freezing and he rubbed my skin to warm it. I stared at the white streaks that mingled with the ginger hair on his crown and bit my lip. The tears in my eyes were not from the pain but from the humiliation of having made a fool of myself. My father's thumb pressed against the swelling around my ankle and I flinched. Already the purple stain of a bruise was beginning to show.

'Anya, you are a white gardenia,' he smiled. 'Beautiful and pure. But we need to handle you with care because you bruise so easily.'

I rested my head on his shoulder, almost laughing but crying at the same time.

A tear splashed onto my wrist and dripped onto the tiles of the entranceway. I quickly wiped my face before my mother turned around. The guests were on their way out and we gave them one more wave and '*Da svidaniya*' before switching off

the lights. My mother took one of the funeral candles from the parlour and we made our way up the stairs by its gentle glow. The flame trembled and I felt the quickness of my mother's breath on my skin. But I was afraid to look at her and see her suffering. I couldn't bear her grief any better than I could my own. I kissed her goodnight at her door and scurried up the stairs to my room in the loft, falling straight into bed and covering my face with a pillow so she wouldn't hear me sobbing. The man who had called me a white gardenia, who had lifted me on his shoulder and twirled me until I was dizzy with laughter, would not be there any more.



Once the official mourning period was over everyone seemed to dissolve back into their daily lives. My mother and I were abandoned, left to learn to live again.

After we had folded the cloths and stacked them in the linen press, my mother said that we should carry the flowers down to my father's favourite cherry tree. While she was helping me with the laces of my boots we heard our dogs, Sasha and Gogle, barking. I rushed to the window, anticipating another round of mourners, but instead I saw two Japanese soldiers waiting at the gate. One was middle-aged with a sabre in his belt and the long boots of a general. His square face was dignified and carved by deep wrinkles, but amusement twitched in the corners of his mouth when he eyed the two huskies leaping at the fence. The younger soldier stood motionless beside him, a clay doll illuminated only by the flicker of his narrow eyes. The colour leached completely from my mother's face when I told her the Japanese army was waiting at the gate.

From a crack in the front door I watched my mother speak with the men, first trying slow Russian and then Chinese. The younger soldier appeared to grasp the Chinese comfortably, while the General cast his gaze about the yard and house, and only paid attention when his aide translated my mother's

answers for him. They were requesting something, bowing at the end of each sentence. This courtesy, not usually extended to the foreigners living in China, seemed to make my mother even uneasier. She was shaking her head, but giving her fear away in the flushed skin around her collar and in her trembling fingers which twisted and pulled at her sleeve cuffs.

In the past few months many Russians had received such visits. The Japanese high command and their assistants were moving into people's homes rather than living in army quarters. It was partly to protect them from Allied air raids but also to deter local resistance movements, either from White Russians turned Soviets or Chinese sympathisers. The only person we knew who had refused them was my father's friend, Professor Akimov, who owned an apartment in Modegow. He had disappeared one night and had never been heard from again. This, however, was the first time they had come this far from the city centre.

The General muttered something to his aide, and when I saw my mother calm the dogs and open the gate I scurried backwards into the house and hid under an armchair, pressing my face against the cold tiles of the entranceway. My mother entered the house first, holding the door for the General. He wiped his boots before coming inside and placed his hat down on the table next to me. I heard my mother take him into our sitting room. He seemed to be muttering his approval in Japanese, and although my mother continued to attempt basic conversation in Russian and Chinese, he gave no indication of understanding her. I wondered why he had left his aide at the gate. My mother and the General went upstairs and I could hear the creak of the floorboards in the spare room and the sound of cupboards being opened and shut. When they returned the General appeared pleased, but my mother's anxiety had travelled to her feet: she was changing her weight from one foot to the other and tapping her shoe. The General bowed and murmured, '*Doomo arigatoo gozaimashita.*' Thank you. When he picked up his hat he spotted me. His eyes were

not like those of other Japanese soldiers I had seen. They were large and bulging, and when he opened them wide and smiled at me, the wrinkles on his forehead scrunched up towards his hairline and he seemed to transform into a large, friendly toad.



Every Sunday my mother, father and I had gathered at the home of our neighbours, Boris and Olga Pomerantsev, for a meal of borscht and rye bread. The elderly couple had been market farmers all their life, but they were gregarious and keen to improve their knowledge and often invited their Chinese acquaintances to join us. Until the Japanese invasion the gatherings had been lively affairs with music and readings from Pushkin, Tolstoy and Chinese poets, but as the occupation became more repressive the lunches became more subdued. All Chinese citizens were under constant surveillance, and those leaving the city had to show papers and get out of their cars or rickshaws to bow to the Japanese guards before they were allowed to move on their way. The only Chinese willing to do that for a social occasion other than a funeral or a wedding were Mr and Mrs Liu.

They had once been well-to-do industrialists, but their cotton factory had been taken over by the Japanese and they survived only because they had been prudent enough not to spend everything they had earned.

The Sunday after my father's mourning my mother waited until after the meal to tell our friends about the General. She spoke in broken whispers, running her hands over the lace tablecloth Olga brought out for special occasions, and cast glances at Mr Liu's sister, Ying-ying. The young woman was asleep in an armchair near the kitchen door, her breathing laboured and a sliver of saliva shining on her chin. It was unusual for Mr Liu to bring his sister to these occasions; he had always preferred to leave her in the care of his eldest daughters whenever he and his wife went out. But it seemed Ying-ying's

depression was getting worse, swinging from days of listlessness to sudden outbursts of wailing and scratching the flesh of her arms until it bled. Mr Liu had sedated her with Chinese herbs and brought her with him, no longer confident that his children could cope.

My mother addressed us with careful words but her practised calmness only aggravated the sinking feeling in my stomach. She explained that the General would be renting the spare room in our house. She emphasised that his headquarters were in another village some distance away and that he would be spending most of his time there and so would not be such an imposition on us. She said that it had been agreed that no soldiers or other military attachés would be allowed to visit the house.

‘Lina, no!’ Olga cried. ‘Such people!’

My mother’s face blanched. ‘How can I refuse him? If I do, I’ll lose the house. Everything. I have to think of Anya.’

‘Better no house than to live with such monsters,’ said Olga. ‘You and Anya can come and live here.’

Boris gripped my mother’s shoulder with his farmer’s hand, pink and rough with calluses. ‘Olga, she will lose more than the house if she refuses.’

My mother lifted her apologetic eyes to the Lius and said, ‘This will not look good in the eyes of my Chinese friends.’

Mrs Liu lowered her gaze but her husband turned his attention to his sister, who was stirring and mumbling names in her sleep. They were always the same names, whether Ying-ying was shouting them whilst Mrs Liu and her daughters held her down in the doctor’s office, or whimpering them before sinking into one of her coma-like slumbers. She had come from Nanking with all the other bleeding and ruined refugees who had fled that city after the Japanese invasion. The names she called out were those of her three baby daughters, slit from throat to belly by the swords of Japanese soldiers. When the soldiers flung the girls’ bodies onto a heap along with the bodies of the other children from their apartment block, one of

the soldiers clamped Ying-ying's head between his fists so that she was forced to watch her daughters' tiny intestines spill to the ground and be fought over by guard dogs. Her husband and the other men were dragged into the street, marked and tied to stakes, and then the Japanese generals ordered the soldiers to plunge their bayonets through them for practice.

I slipped from the table unnoticed and ran outside to play with the cat who lived in the Pomerantsevs' garden. He was a stray with torn ears and a blind eye but he had grown fat and contented under Olga's attention. I pressed my face into his musky fur and wept. Stories like Ying-ying's were whispered all over Harbin and even I had seen enough of Japanese cruelty to hate them too.

The Japanese had annexed Manchuria in 1937, although it had been effectively invaded six years earlier. As the war became more intense, the Japanese issued an edict that all rice was to go to their army. The Chinese were reduced to acorn meal as a staple food, and this couldn't be digested by the very young or the sick. One day I was running along the twisted, leafy path by the river that flowed past our house. We had been let out from school early by our new Japanese principal, who had instructed us to go home and tell our parents of the recent Japanese victories in Manchuria. I was wearing my white convent uniform and enjoying the patterns the filtered sunlight made over me as I skipped along. I passed Doctor Chou, the local physician, on my way. Doctor Chou was trained in both Western and traditional medicine and was carrying a box of vials under his arm. He was famous for his sharp dress sense, and that day he was decked out in a well-cut Western suit and coat with a Panama hat. The mild weather seemed to please him too and we smiled at each other.

I passed him and reached the bend in the river where the forest was darkest and draped in vines. I was stunned by a loud shriek and stopped in my tracks when a Chinese farmer with a bruised and bleeding face lurched towards me. Japanese soldiers burst through the trees after him and surrounded us,

waving their bayonets. The leader drew his sword and pressed it under the man's chin, making an indent in the flesh of his neck. He lifted the man's eyes to his, but I could see in their dimness and in the droop of his mouth that the light had already gone out of him. The farmer's jacket was streaming water and one of the soldiers took a knife and ripped open the left panel. Rice dropped in damp clumps to the ground.

The soldiers made the man kneel, taunting him and howling like wolves. The pack leader plunged his sword into the man's other jacket panel and blood and rice flowed out together. Vomit trickled from the man's lips. I heard glass smash and turned to see Doctor Chou standing behind me, his vials broken and leaking on the rocky path. Horror was etched in the grooves of his face. I stepped back, unnoticed by the soldiers, and into his outstretched arms.

The soldiers were grunting, excited by the smell of blood and fear. The leader pulled at the prisoner's collar, exposing his neck. In a single swoop he dropped his sword and sliced the man's head off at the shoulders. The bloody flesh rolled into the river, turning the water the colour of sorghum wine. The corpse remained upright, as if praying, and gushed blood in spurts. The soldiers stood back from it calmly and without guilt or disgust. Pools of blood and fluid collected around our feet and stained our shoes and the soldiers began to laugh. The killer lifted his sword to the sunlight and frowned at the muck that dripped from it. He looked around for something with which to clean it and laid eyes on my dress. He grabbed for me, but the outraged doctor pushed me further inside his coat, muttering curses at the soldiers. The leader grinned, mistaking Doctor Chou's curses for protests, and wiped his glistening sword across the doctor's shoulder. It must have disgusted Doctor Chou, who had just witnessed the murder of a fellow Chinese, but he remained silent in order to protect me.

My father was alive then, and that evening, after he had tucked me into bed and listened with restrained anger to my story, I heard him tell my mother on the landing: 'It's because

their own leaders treat them so cruelly that they have lost all semblance of humanity. Their generals are to blame.'



At first the General brought little change to our lives and kept mainly to himself. He arrived with a futon, a gas cooker and a large trunk. We were only aware of his existence each morning, just after sunrise, when the black car would pull up outside our gate and the chickens in the yard would flutter as the General passed through them. And then in the evenings, when he would return late, weariness in his eyes, and give a nod to my mother and a smile to me before retiring to his room.

The General conducted himself with surprisingly good manners for a member of the occupying army. He paid rent and for anything he used, and after a while started bringing home rationed or banned items such as rice and sweet bean dumplings. He would place these luxuries, wrapped in cloth, on the dining table or kitchen bench before going to his room. My mother eyed the packages suspiciously and would not touch them, but she did not stop me from accepting the gifts. The General must have come to understand that my mother's goodwill could not be bought with items that had been taken from the Chinese, as the gifts were soon supplemented with secret acts of mending. One day we would find that a previously jammed window had been fixed, on another that a squeaky door had been oiled or a draughty corner sealed.

But it wasn't long before the General's presence became more invasive, like a potted vine that finds its way into the soil and takes over the garden.

On the fortieth day after my father's death, we visited the Pomerantsevs. The lunch was more light-hearted than usual, although it was only the four of us since the Lius would no longer come when we were invited.

Boris had managed to buy vodka, and even I was allowed some to 'warm' me. He amused us by suddenly whipping off

his hat and revealing his closely cropped hair. My mother gingerly patted it and joked, 'Boris, who did this cruel thing to you? You look like a Siamese cat.'

Olga poured some more vodka, teasing me by pretending to pass over my glass several times, then scowled. 'He paid money for someone to do that to him! Some fancy new Chinese barber in the old quarter.'

Her husband grinned his yellow-toothed, happy grin and laughed. 'She's just upset because it looks better than when she does it.'

'When I saw you looking like such a fool, my weak old heart nearly gave out,' his wife retorted.

Boris took the vodka bottle and poured another round for everyone except his wife. When she frowned at him, he lifted his eyebrows and said: 'Mind your weak old heart now, Olga.'

My mother and I walked home, holding hands and kicking at the freshly fallen snow. She sang a song about gathering mushrooms. Every time she laughed little puffs of steam floated from her mouth. She looked beautiful, despite the grief that was etched behind her eyes. I wanted to be like her but I had inherited my father's strawberry blonde hair, blue eyes and freckles.

When we reached our gate, my mother's gaze narrowed at the sight of the Japanese lantern hanging over it. She rushed me inside, peeling off her coat and boots before helping me with mine. She jumped to the sitting room doorway, urging me to hurry so that I didn't catch cold from the tiled floor in the entranceway. When she turned to face the room she stiffened like a panicked cat. I stepped up behind her. Piled in one corner and covered with a red cloth was our furniture. Next to it a window alcove had been converted into a shrine complete with a scroll and ikebana flower arrangement. The rugs were gone and had been replaced by tatami mats.

My mother stormed through the house in search of the General, but he was not in his room or in the yard. We waited by the coal heater until nightfall, my mother rehearsing angry

words for him. But the General did not come home that night and she lapsed into quiet despondency. We fell asleep, snuggled side by side near the dying fire.

The General did not return to the house until two days later, by which time exhaustion had drained the fight out of my mother. When he burst through the door with handfuls of tea, dress cloth and thread, he seemed to expect us to be grateful. In the delight and mischief in his eyes I saw my father again, the provider who found pleasure in securing treasures for his loved ones.

The General changed into a kimono of grey silk and set about cooking us vegetables and bean curd. My mother, whose elegant antique chairs had been packed away and who had no choice but to sit cross-legged on a cushion, stared out in front of her, purse-mouthed and indignant, while the house soaked in the aroma of sesame seed oil and soy sauce. I gaped at the lacquered plates the General set out on the low table, speechless but thankful for the small mercy that the General was cooking for us. I would have hated to see what would have happened had he ordered my mother to cook for him. He was obviously not like the Japanese men I had seen in our village, whose women had to wait on them hand and foot, and who made their wives walk several paces behind them, burdened by the weight of whatever goods they had bought at the markets, while they strutted on ahead, empty-handed, heads held high. Olga once said that the Japanese race had no women, just donkeys.

The General placed the noodles in front of us and, with nothing more than a grunt of *'Itadakimasu'*, began eating. He seemed not to notice that my mother did not touch her plate, or that I sat staring at the juicy noodles, my mouth salivating. I was torn between my hunger pangs and my loyalty to my mother. As soon as the General finished eating, I rushed to clear the plates so that he wouldn't see that we had not eaten his meal. It was the best compromise I could make, for I did not want my mother's annoyance to bring any harm to her.

When I returned from the kitchen, the General was straightening out a roll of Japanese paper. It wasn't white and shiny like Western paper, nor was it completely matt. It was luminous. The General was on his hands and knees while my mother looked on, an exasperated expression on her face. The scene reminded me of a fable my father had once read to me about Marco Polo's first appearance before Kublai Khan, the ruler of China. In a gesture contrived to demonstrate European superiority, Polo's assistants unravelled a bolt of silk in front of the emperor and his courtiers. The material unfurled into a glistening stream that began with Polo and ended at the feet of Khan. After a moment's silence the emperor and his entourage burst into laughter. Polo soon discovered that it was hard to impress people who had been producing fine silk centuries before the Europeans stopped wearing animal skins.

The General beckoned for me to sit next to him and laid out an ink pot and calligraphy brush. He dipped the brush and set it to the paper, pouring out the feminine swirls of Japanese *hiragana*. I recognised the letters from the lessons we'd had when the Japanese had first taken over my school, before they decided it was better not to educate us at all and shut it down.

'Any-chan,' the General said in his jumbled Russian, 'I teach you Japanese characters. Important for you to learn.'

I watched him deftly make the syllables come to life. *Ta, chi, tsu, te, to*. His fingers moved as if he were painting rather than writing and his hands mesmerised me. The skin was smooth and hairless, the nails as clean as bleached pebbles.

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself and your people,' cried my mother, snatching the paper from the General. She tried to tear it, but it was sinewy and pliant. So she scrunched it into a ball and threw it across the room. The paper dropped soundlessly to the floor.

I sucked in a breath. She glanced at me and stopped herself from saying anything more. She was trembling with anger but also with fear at what her outburst might cost us.

The General sat with his hands on his knees, not moving. The expression on his face was neutral. It was impossible to tell whether he was angry or just thinking. The tip of the brush dripped ink onto the tatami mat, where it spread out into a dark stain, like a wound. After a while the General reached into his kimono sleeve and took out a photograph and gave it to me. It was a picture of a woman in a black kimono and a young girl. The girl wore her hair in a topknot and had eyes as pretty as those of a deer. She looked almost the same age as me. The woman was glancing slightly out of the frame. Her hair was pulled away from her face. Her lips were powdered white and filled in with a narrow bow, but this couldn't hide the fullness of her mouth. The expression on her handsome face was formal, but something about the turn of her head suggested she was smiling at someone off camera.

'I have a little girl at home in Nagasaki with her mother and no father,' the General said. 'And you are a little girl without a father. I must take care of you.'

With that he stood up, bowed and left the room, leaving my mother and me standing with our mouths open, unable to think of anything to say.



Every second Tuesday the knife sharpener would come to our street. He was an old Russian with a lined face and mournful eyes. He had no hat and kept his head warm by wrapping it in rags. His sharpening wheel was strapped to a sled pulled by two Alsatians, and I would play with the dogs while my mother and our neighbours gathered to sharpen their knives and axes. One Tuesday Boris approached my mother and whispered that one of our neighbours, Nikolai Botkin, had disappeared. My mother's face froze for a moment before she whispered back, 'The Japanese or the Communists?'

Boris shrugged. 'I saw him only the day before yesterday at the barber in the old quarter. He talked too much. Boasted too

much about how the Japs are losing the war and that they are just concealing it from us. The next day,' said Boris, clenching his hand and then springing it open to the air, 'he is gone. Like dust. That man's mouth was too big for his own good. You never know whose side the other customers are on. Some Russians want the Japs to win.'

At that moment there was a loud cry, '*Kazaaa!*', and our garage doors flew open and a man ran out. He was naked, except for a knotted bandana pulled low on his brow. I didn't realise that it was the General until I saw him throw himself into the snow and leap up for joy. Boris tried to cover my eyes but through the gaps in his fingers I was startled to see the General's shrivelled appendage jiggling between his legs.

Olga slapped her knees and screeched with laughter, while the other neighbours stared, open-mouthed, in amazement. But my mother saw the hot tub that had been constructed in her sacred garage and screamed. This last insult was too much for her to bear. Boris dropped his hands and I turned to see my mother as she had been before my father's death, her cheeks glowing and her eyes on fire. She raced into the yard, picking up a spade by the gate on her way. The General glanced from his hot tub to my mother, as if he were expecting her to marvel at his ingenuity.

'How dare you!' she screamed at him.

The smile died on his face but I could see that he couldn't comprehend her reaction.

'How dare you!' she screamed again, hitting him across the cheek with the spade handle.

Olga gasped but the General didn't seem worried about the neighbours witnessing my mother's insurrection. He didn't take his eyes from her face.

'It's one of the few things I have left to remember him by,' my mother said, losing her breath.

The General's face reddened. He stood up and retreated into the house without a word.

The following day the General dismantled the hot tub and offered us the wood for the fire. He took away the tatami mats

and put back the Turkish carpets and sheepskin rugs for which my father had once traded his gold watch.

Later in the afternoon he asked if he could borrow my bicycle. My mother and I peered through the curtains to watch the General trundle down the road. My bike was too small for him. The pedals were short, so that with each rotation his knees passed his hips. But he handled the bicycle skilfully and in a few minutes disappeared through the trees.

By the time the General returned, my mother and I had adjusted the furniture and rugs back to almost the very inch where they had stood before.

The General glanced around the room. A shadow passed over his face. 'I wanted to make it beautiful for you but I did not succeed,' he said, using his foot to examine the magenta rug that had triumphed over his simple tatami. 'Perhaps we are too different.'

My mother almost smiled but stopped herself. I thought the General was about to leave, but he turned one more time to glance back at her, not at all like a regal military man but more like a shy boy who has been scolded by his mother. 'Maybe I have found something on whose beauty we can agree?' he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a glass box.

My mother hesitated before taking it from him, but in the end couldn't resist her own curiosity. I leaned forward, compelled to see what the General had brought. My mother opened the lid and a delicate scent wafted into the air. I knew it at once, although it was something I had never experienced before. The perfume became stronger, floating around the room and enveloping us in its spell. It was a blend of magic and romance, the exotic East and the decadent West. It made my heart ache and my skin tingle.

My mother's eyes were on me. They were glistening with tears. She held out the box and I stared at the creamy white flower inside. The sight of the perfect bloom set in a foliage of glossy green leaves conjured up a place where the light was dappled and birds sang day and night. I wanted to cry with the

beauty of it, for instantly I knew the name of the flower, although until then I had only ever seen it in my imagination. The tree originated from China but was tropical and would not grow in Harbin where the frosts were brutal.

The white gardenia was a legend my father had spun for my mother and me many times. He had first seen the flower himself when he had accompanied his family to the Tsar's summer ball at the Grand Palace. He would describe to us the women in their flowing gowns with jewels sparkling in their hair, the footmen and the carriages, and a supper of fresh caviar, smoked goose and *sterlet* soup served at round glass tables. Later there was a fireworks display choreographed to the music of Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*. After meeting the Tsar and his family, my father walked into a room whose glass doors were thrown open to the garden. That was when he first saw them. The porcelain pots of gardenias had been imported from China for the occasion. In the summer air their delicate scent was intoxicating. The flowers seemed to nod and receive my father gracefully, as the Tsarina and her daughters had done just moments before. From that night on my father had been enamoured by the memory of northern white nights and a bewitching flower whose perfume conjured up paradise.

More than once my father had tried to purchase a bottle of the scent so that my mother and I could relive this memory too, but no one in Harbin had heard of the enchanting flower and his efforts were always in vain.

'Where did you get this?' my mother asked the General, running her fingertip over the dewy petals.

'From a Chinaman called Huang,' he answered. 'He has a hothouse outside of the city.'

But my mother barely heard his answer, her mind was a million miles away on a St Petersburg night. The General turned to go. I followed him to the foot of the stairs.

'Sir,' I whispered to him. 'How did you know?'

He raised his eyebrows and stared at me. His bruised cheek was the colour of a fresh plum.

‘About the flower,’ I said.

But the General only sighed, touched my shoulder and said, ‘Goodnight.’



By the time spring came and the snow started melting there were rumours everywhere that the Japanese were losing the war. In the night I could hear planes and gunfire, which Boris told us was the Soviets fighting the Japanese at the borders. ‘God help us,’ he said, ‘if the Soviets get here before the Americans.’

I decided to find out whether the Japanese were really losing the war and hatched a plan to follow the General to his headquarters. My first two attempts to get up before him failed when I slept past my own usual waking time, but on the third day I was woken by a dream of my father. He was standing before me, smiling, and saying, ‘Don’t worry. You will seem all alone, but you won’t be. I will send someone.’ His image faded and I blinked at the early morning light making its way through my curtains. I leaped out of bed into the chilly air, and only had to pull on my coat and hat, having prepared myself by sleeping fully clothed and with my boots on. I sneaked out the kitchen door and to the side of the garage where I had hidden my bicycle. I crouched on the slushy ground and waited. A few minutes later the black car pulled up at our gate. The front door opened and the General strode out. When the car moved off, I jumped on my bicycle and pedalled furiously to keep even a discreet distance. The sky was cloudy and the road dark and muddy. When it reached the junction, the car stopped and I hid behind a tree. The driver reversed a short distance and changed direction, no longer heading along the road to the next village where the General had told us he went each day, but taking the main one to the city. I mounted my bicycle again but when I reached the junction I hit a rock and toppled over, slamming my shoulder into the ground. I winced in pain and looked at

my bicycle. The front spokes had been bent by my boot. Tears leaked from my eyes and I limped back up the hill, walking the squealing bike next to me.

Just before I reached home I saw a Chinese man peek out from a grove of trees by the road. He looked as if he was waiting for me, so I crossed to the other side and began running with my wonky bicycle. But he soon caught up, greeting me in well-spoken Russian. There was something in his glassy-eyed gaze that made me afraid and I replied with silence. 'Why,' he asked, sighing as if he were talking to a naughty sister, 'do you let the Japanese stay with you?'

'We had nothing to do with it,' I answered, my eyes still averted. 'He just came and we couldn't say no.'

He took the handlebars of the bicycle, pretending to help me with it, and I noticed his gloves. They were padded and shaped as if he had apples in them instead of hands.

'They are very bad, the Japanese,' he continued. 'They have done terrible things. The Chinese people will not forget who helped us and who helped them.' His tone was kind and intimate but his words sent a chill through me and I forgot the ache in my shoulder. He stopped pushing the bicycle and laid it on its side. I wanted to run but I was frozen with fear. Slowly and deliberately he lifted his glove to my face and then pulled the material away with the grace of a magician. He held before me a mangled mess of badly healed flesh, twisted into a club with no fingers. I cried out at the horror of it but knew he was not doing it for effect alone; it was a warning. I left my bicycle and ran through the gate to my house. 'My name is Tang!' the man called out after me. 'Remember it!'

I turned when I reached the door but he was gone. I clambered up the stairs to my mother's bedroom, my heart beating like thunder in my chest. But when I pushed open the door I saw that she was still asleep, her dark hair spread over the pillow. I removed my coat, gently lifted the bedclothes and climbed in beside her. She sighed and brushed her hand against me before falling back into a sleep as still as death.



August was the month of my thirteenth birthday, and despite the war and my father's death, my mother was determined to keep our family tradition of taking me to the old quarter to celebrate. Boris and Olga drove us into the city that day; Olga wanted to buy some spices and Boris was going to get his hair cut again. Harbin was the place of my birth, and although many Chinese said that we Russians never belonged nor had any right to it, I felt that it somehow belonged to me. When we entered the city, I saw all that was familiar and home to me in the onion-domed churches, the pastel-coloured buildings and the elaborate colonnades. Like me, my mother was born in Harbin. She was the daughter of an engineer who had lost his job on the railways after the Revolution. It was my noble father who had somehow connected us to Russia and made us see ourselves in the architecture of the Tsars.

Boris and Olga dropped us off in the old quarter. It was unusually hot and humid that day, so my mother suggested we try the city's speciality, vanilla bean ice-cream. Our favourite café was bustling with people and much livelier than we had seen it in years. Everyone was talking about the rumours that the Japanese were about to surrender. My mother and I took a table near the window. A woman at the next table was telling her older companion that she had heard the Americans bombing the previous night, and that a Japanese official had been murdered in her district. Her companion nodded solemnly, running his hand through his grey beard and commenting, 'The Chinese would never dare do that if they didn't feel that they were winning.'

After my ice-cream, my mother and I took a walk around the quarter, noticing which shops were new and remembering the shops that had disappeared. A peddler of porcelain dolls tried to entice me with her wares, but my mother smiled at me and said, 'Don't worry, I have something for you at home.'

I spotted the red and white pole of a barber's shop with a sign in Chinese and Russian. 'Look, Mama!' I said. 'That must

be Boris's barber.' I rushed to the window to peek inside. Boris was in the chair, his face covered in shaving foam. A few other customers were waiting, smoking and laughing like men with nothing much to do. Boris saw me in the mirror and turned and waved. The bald-headed barber, in an embroidered jacket, also looked up. He had a Confucian moustache and goatee and wore glasses with thick frames, the kind popular among Chinese men. But when he saw my face pressed against the window, he quickly turned his back to me.

'Come on, Anya,' my mother laughed, pulling my arm. 'Boris will get a bad haircut if you distract the barber. He might cut off his ear, and then Olga will be annoyed with you.'

I followed my mother obediently, but as we neared the corner I turned one more time towards the barber's shop. I couldn't see the barber through the shine on the glass, but I realised that I knew those eyes: they had been round and bulging and familiar to me.

When we returned home my mother sat me before her dressing table and reverently undid my girlish plaits and swept my hair into an elegant chignon like hers, with the hair parted at the side and bunched at the nape of the neck. She dabbed perfume behind my ears, then showed me a velvet box on her dresser. When she opened it I saw inside the gold and jade necklace my father had given her as a wedding present. She picked it up and kissed it, before placing it around my throat and fastening the clip.

'Mama!' I protested, knowing how much the necklace meant to her.

She pursed her lips. 'I want to give it to you now, Anya, because you are becoming a young woman. Your father would have been pleased to see you wear it on special occasions.'

I touched the necklace with trembling fingers. Although I missed seeing my father and talking with him, I felt that he was never far away. The jade seemed warm against my skin, not cold.

'He's with us, Mama,' I said. 'I know it.'

She nodded and sniffed back a tear. 'I have something else for you, Anya,' she said, opening the drawer near my knee and taking out a package wrapped in cloth. 'Something to remind you that you will always be my little girl.'

I took the package from her and untied the knot, excited to see what was inside. It was a matroshka doll with the smiling face of my late grandmother. I turned to my mother, knowing that she had painted it. She laughed and urged me to open it and find the next doll. I unscrewed the doll's torso and found that the second doll had dark hair and amber eyes. I smiled at my mother's joke, and knew that the following doll would have strawberry blonde hair and blue eyes, but when I saw it also had a smatter of freckles across its funny face, I burst into giggles. I opened that doll to find a smaller one and looked up again at my mother. 'Your daughter and my granddaughter,' she said. 'And with her smaller baby daughter inside her.'

I screwed all the dolls back together and lined them up on the dressing table, contemplating our matriarchal journey and wishing that my mother and I could always be just as we were at that moment.

Afterwards, in the kitchen, my mother placed an apple *pirog* before me. She was just about to cut the little pie when we heard the front door open. I glanced at the clock and knew it would be the General. He spent a long time in the entranceway before coming into the house. When he did finally enter the kitchen, he stumbled, his face a sickly colour. My mother asked if he was ill but he didn't answer her and collapsed into a chair, resting his head in his folded arms. My mother stood up, horrified, and asked me to fetch some warm tea and bread. When I offered these to the General, he looked up at me with red-rimmed eyes.

He glanced at my birthday pie and reached over to me, patting my head clumsily. I could smell the alcohol on his breath when he said, 'You are my daughter.' The General turned to my mother and with tears falling down his cheeks said to her, 'You are my wife.' Sitting back in the chair, he composed himself,

wiping his face with the back of his hand. My mother offered him the tea and he took a sip and a slice of bread. His face was contorted with pain, but after a while it relaxed and he sighed as if he had reached a decision. He rose from the table and, turning to my mother, gave a charade performance of her hitting him with the spade handle after discovering his secret hot tub. He laughed then, and my mother looked at him, astonished for a moment, before laughing herself.

She asked him in slow Russian what he did before the war, had he always been a general. He looked confused for a moment, then pointed his finger to his nose and asked 'Me?' My mother nodded and repeated her question. He shook his head and closed the door behind him, muttering in Russian so well pronounced that he could have been one of us, 'Before all this madness? I was an actor. In the theatre.'

The next morning the General was gone. There was a note pinned to the kitchen door, written in precise Russian. My mother read it first, her frightened eyes scanning the words twice, then handed it to me. The General had instructed us to burn everything he had left in the garage and to burn the note after reading it. He said that he had placed our lives in great danger when his only wish had been to protect us. He told us that we must destroy every trace of him for our own sake.

My mother and I ran to the Pomerantsevs' house. Boris was chopping wood, but stopped when he saw us, wiping the sweat from his ruddy face and rushing us inside.

Olga was by the stove, twisting her knitting in her hands. She jumped out of her chair when she saw us. 'Have you heard?' she asked, white-faced and shaking. 'The Soviets are coming. The Japanese have surrendered.'

Her words seemed to shatter my mother. 'The Soviets or the Americans?' she asked, her voice rising in agitation.

I could feel myself inwardly willing that it was the Americans who were coming to liberate us with their wide smiles and bright flags. But Olga shook her head. 'The Soviets,' she cried. 'They are coming to help the Communists.'

My mother handed her the General's note. 'My God!' said Olga after reading it. She collapsed into her chair and passed the note to her husband.

'He spoke fluent Russian?' Boris asked. 'You didn't know?'

Boris began talking about an old friend in Shanghai, someone who would help us. The Americans were on their way there, he said, and my mother and I should go immediately. My mother asked if Boris and Olga would come too, but Boris shook his head and joked, 'Lina, what are they going to do to a couple of old reindeers like us? The daughter of a White Army colonel is a much better prize. You must get Anya out of here now.'

With the wood Boris had chopped for us we made a fire and burned the letter along with the General's bedding and eating utensils. I watched my mother's face as the flames rose and felt the same loneliness I saw written there. We were cremating a companion, someone we had never known or understood, but a companion just the same. My mother was relocking the garage when she noticed the trunk. It was jammed into a corner and hidden under some empty sacks. We lugged it out of its hiding place. The trunk was antique and beautifully carved with a picture of an old man with a long moustache holding a fan and gazing across a pond. My mother smashed the padlock with an axe and we lifted the lid together. The General's uniform was folded there. She picked it up and I saw an embroidered jacket in the bottom of the trunk. Underneath the jacket we found a false moustache and beard, some makeup, thick-rimmed glasses and a copy of the *New Pocket Atlas of China* folded in a sheet of old newspaper. My mother stared at me, puzzled. I said nothing. I hoped that if only I knew the General's secret we would be safe.

After we had burned everything, we turned over the soil and patted away the stain with the backs of our shovels.



My mother and I went to the district official's office to get a permit to go to Dairen where we hoped to board a ship to Shanghai. There were dozens of other Russians waiting in the corridors and on the staircase, and some other foreigners and Chinese too. They were all talking about the Soviets and how some of them were already in Harbin, rounding up the White Russians. An old lady beside us told my mother that the Japanese family next door to her had committed suicide, terrified of the vengeance of the Chinese. My mother asked her what had made Japan surrender, and she shrugged, but a young man answered that he had heard rumours of a new kind of bomb dropped on Japanese cities. The official's assistant came out and told us that no permits would be issued until all those seeking them had been interviewed by a member of the Communist party.

When we returned home our dogs were nowhere in sight and the door was unlocked and ajar. My mother paused before pushing it open, and just as her face on the day after my father's mourning remains in my memory, so is that moment imprinted on my mind, like a scene from a film played over and over again: my mother's hand on the door, the door swinging slowly open, the darkness and silence inside, and the incredible sense of knowing that someone was there, waiting for us.

My mother's hand dropped to her side and felt for mine. It wasn't trembling as it had since my father's death. It was warm and strong and decisive. We moved together, not taking off our shoes in the entranceway as we had always done, but continuing on into the sitting room. When I saw him there at the table, his mutilated hands resting before him, I wasn't surprised. It was as if I had been expecting him all along. My mother said nothing. She met his glassy eyes with a blank expression. He gave a bitter smile and motioned for us to sit down at the table with him. It was then that we noticed the other man, the one standing by the window. He was tall with piercing blue eyes and a moustache that hung from his lip like a winter fur.

Although it was summer, darkness fell quickly that evening. I remember the sensation of my mother's firm grip on my hand, the fading afternoon light retreating across the floor, and then the whistling sound of a storm beating against the unshuttered windows. Tang interviewed us first, his tight-lipped smile appearing whenever my mother answered his questions. He told us that the General had not been a general at all, but a spy who also masqueraded as a barber. He was fluent in Chinese and Russian, a master of disguise who used his skills to gather information on the Resistance. Because the Russians thought he was Chinese, they felt quite comfortable gathering at his shop and discussing their plans, and revealing those of their Chinese counterparts. I was glad then that I had not told my mother that I had understood who the General was as soon as I saw the costume in the trunk. Tang's face was fixed on my mother's and she looked so shocked that I felt sure he would believe she had no part in the General's work.

But even though it was obvious that my mother had not known who the General was, that we had not received any visitors while he lived with us, and that we were unaware that he could speak any language other than Japanese, it could not erase the hate Tang felt towards us. His whole person seemed to be inflamed with it. Such malice burned to only one goal: revenge.

'Madame Kozlova, have you heard of Unit 731?' he asked, restrained anger contorting his face. He seemed to be satisfied when my mother didn't answer. 'No, of course not. Nor would have your General Mizutani. Your cultured, well-spoken General Mizutani who bathed once a day and has never in his life killed a man with his own hands. But he seemed quite content to condemn people there, as you were to house a man whose countrymen have been slaughtering us. You and the General have as much blood on your hands as any army.'

Tang lifted his hand and waved the infected mess in front of my mother's face. 'You Russians, protected by your white skin and Western ways, don't know about the live experiments that

took place in the district next to this one. I am the only survivor. One of the many they tied to stakes in the snow, so that their nice clean educated doctors could observe the effects of frostbite and gangrene in order to prevent it happening to their own soldiers. But perhaps we were the lucky ones. They always intended to shoot us in the end. Not like the others, whom they infected with plague then cut open without anaesthetic to observe the effects. I wonder if you could imagine the feeling of having your head sawn open while still alive? Or being raped by a doctor so that he could impregnate you then cut you open and look at the foetus.'

Horror pinched my mother's face but she never took her eyes off Tang. Seeing that he hadn't broken her, he flashed his cruel smile again, and using his clubbed hand and elbow removed a photograph from a folder on the table. It appeared to be of someone tied down on a table surrounded by doctors, but the overhead light was reflecting in the middle of it and I couldn't make it out clearly. He told my mother to pick it up; she looked at it and turned away.

'Perhaps I should show it to your daughter?' he said. 'They are about the same age.'

My mother's eyes flamed and she met his hate with her anger. 'My daughter is only a child. Hate me if you want, but what say has she had in anything?' She glanced at the photograph again and tears came to her eyes, but she blinked them away. Tang smiled, triumphant. He was about to say something when the other man coughed. I had almost forgotten the Russian, he had sat so quietly, gazing out the window, perhaps not listening at all.

When the Soviet officer questioned my mother, it was as if we had changed the script and were suddenly in a different play. He was unconcerned with Tang's thirst for revenge or details about the General. He acted as if the Japanese had never been in China; he had really come to grab my father's throat and, my father not being there, had settled on us. His questions to my mother were all about her family background and that of my

father. He asked about the value of our house and my mother's assets, giving a little snort to each reply as if he were ticking off a form. 'Well,' he said, appraising me with his yellow-speckled eyes, 'you won't have such things in the Soviet Union.'

My mother asked him what he meant, and he replied with distaste, 'She is the daughter of a colonel of the Russian Imperialist Army. A supporter of the Tsar who turned his guns on his own people. She has his blood. And you,' he sneered at my mother, 'are of little interest to us but of great interest to the Chinese, it seems. They need examples of what is done to traitors. The Soviet Union just needs to call home its workers. Its *young*, able-bodied workers.'

My mother's face didn't change expression, but she gripped my hand tighter, squeezing the blood out of it and bruising the bones. But I didn't wince or cry out from the pain. I wanted her to hold me like that forever, to never let me go.

With the room spinning and me nearly passing out from the pain of my mother's grip, Tang and the Soviet officer made their devil's bargain: my mother in exchange for me. The Russian got his able-bodied worker and the Chinese man got his revenge.



I stood on the tips of my toes, reaching upwards to the train window so that I could touch the fingertips of my mother's outstretched hand. She had pressed herself against the window frame so that she could be near to me. From the corner of my eye I could see Tang standing with the Soviet officer by the car. He was pacing like a hungry tiger, waiting to take me. There was much confusion on the station. An elderly couple were clinging to their son. A Soviet soldier shoved them away, forcing the young man onto a carriage, pushing him in the back as if he were a sack of potatoes not a person. In the cramped carriage he tried to turn to look at his mother one last time, but more men were pushed in behind him and he lost his chance.

My mother gripped the window bars and hoisted herself higher so I could see her face more clearly. She was very drawn with shadows under her eyes, but she was still beautiful. She told me my favourite stories over again and sang the song about the mushrooms to calm my tears. Other people were reaching their hands out of the train windows to say goodbye to their families and neighbours, but the soldiers beat them back. The guard near us was young, almost a boy, with porcelain skin and eyes like crystals. He must have taken pity on us for he turned his back to us and shielded our last moment from the view of others.

The train began to pull away. I held onto my mother's fingers as long as I could, side-stepping the people and boxes on the platform. I tried to keep up but the train gathered speed and I lost my grip. My mother was tugged away from me. She turned back, covering her mouth with her fist because she was no longer able to contain her own grief. My tears stung my eyes but I wouldn't blink. I watched the train until it disappeared from view. I fell against a lamppost, weakened by the hole that was opening up inside me. But an unseen hand held me upright. I heard my father say to me: 'You will seem all alone, but you won't be. I will send someone.'