White Gardenia

Belinda Alexandra

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Extract

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PART ONE

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 piece 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.

'Anya-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.