

## *A Child's Hands*

THEY CALLED ME LING. Names don't come much more forgettable than that. And my story didn't begin on the day of my birth, August 3, 1922. I was just a wailing blob that day, and thus no different from all other blobs in history that were pulled screaming from their mothers' loins and then subjected to the universal rigmarole of walking and talking, eating and sleeping. I was told that I mastered those skills more quickly than most, so eager was I to win my parents' affection as well as some invisible contest against time that only I knew about. But again, this precocity was far from a defining character trait. I was a young child. And babies are in general uninteresting people.

My real story began in the summer of 1929, on my seventh birthday. Or, more correctly, *our* birthday. I was older than my brother, Li, by four or five minutes, a race I won, I always believed, by being closer to the gate and not by the heartless bullying of my weaker twin as the midwife insisted. (Chinese midwives! Always rooting against girls!) I was undeniably a stronger baby than Li—I cried louder, kicked harder, weighed more—but I plead my case that in the womb, there was no pushing and shoving or malicious piggery. Of course, when Li emerged emaciated, his wail barely a whimper—and a boy, no less!—everyone listened to the midwife. They all blamed me.

As soon as we were born, my parents tried to counter the injustice. What happened in Mother's belly was out of their purview, but so long as Li and I lived in their house, under their care, they would make it up to him. They always gave him whatever he wanted; he always got the first pick. From the moment the midwife washed the blood off her hands and wobbled down the stairs, it no longer mattered that I was the eldest. The roles were cast: Li was the hero. I was the sidekick.

## THE BLACK ISLE

By the time of our seventh birthday, Li had grown into a vigorous boy, a natural leader, taller than me by two inches. He led and I followed. He became my protector and benefactor. If he was offered a cream puff, he would ask for two so he could give me one. Soon I no longer had to fight or choose or pine. I got used to coming in second and began to prefer being his shadow—there was never any pressure to be original or brave. One should never underestimate the joy of being underestimated.

In looks, Li was nothing special, just your generic little prewar, middle-class Chinese boy in flannel shirts and corduroy shorts, always smiling, always smelling faintly of chalk. I had my hair in two pigtails and wore pinafores made of flannel and corduroy, surplus fabric from the construction of Li's shirts and shorts. Neither of us had any distinctive features or battle scars; no stranger passing us on the street would stop to cry out in glee or in horror. We might as well have been invisible, as far as the wider world was concerned, two children drowned in an endless sea of black hair and narrow eyes. But to me, Li was the handsomest boy in all of China.

His things filled our house: model cars, dancing bears, books about planes and warships, many ordered from America. "What will I get for my birthday?" he'd ask, months before the actual day. "Anything," was Mother's invariable answer. "Anything your heart desires."

This never became an issue until the day of our seventh birthday. I always took whatever they gave me, be it pencil case, scarf, or slippers, so I was never a problem. And until then, Li's taste was conventional—our parents held boats, planes, and trains on reserve at the toy shop until he made up his mind—but for our seventh, he kept his request secret until the big day. I saw him go over to Mother and whisper in her ear.

"No," Mother said definitively, and stormed up the stairs.

There were two ways of looking at Shanghai in those days. It was either the Pearl of the Orient or the Devil's Den. There was no in-between; you belonged to one camp or the other. Our mother evidently belonged to the latter. She had been raised in a cloistered Suzhou compound by spinster maids who taught her to fear and loathe the outside world. Her fear was so great that it rendered the binding of her feet unnecessary—there was no risk she'd run off anywhere.

Shanghai only heightened her nervousness. None of the hedonistic

thrills of big-city living for her. She was happiest in her dark little rooms, where she could pore over opulent catalogs, oversee the help, and fret in peace. Indeed, her unnatural pallor that came from staying indoors was considered quite fashionable. But there was a price to her agoraphobia. The feral love affair Li and I had with sunlight and nature caused her great anguish. It only proved to her that she had been inadequate in her job. What provident mother had children who needed to leave her house to seek fun?

That's why she felt profoundly wounded when Li, for his seventh birthday, whispered these simple words: "Take us to the park." She doubtless felt he was attacking her weakness with a son's malice. Her "no" resounded through the house, the louder for being the only time he'd been denied.

Our home on Rue Bourgeat was everything that a good middle-class town house should look like, at least on the outside. It was in the French Concession, which telegraphed that we belonged in the happy bourgeois world of cosmopolitan Shanghai, and it had the requisite white walls, which proved that we could afford to hire painters to undo the darkening effects of the region's inclemency. We even had a waist-high wrought-iron gate in the Kensington Gardens style, an ornamental barrier between our front step and the toothless kumquat and lychee vendors who traversed the dusty pavement. We cherished our borders. To the outside world, we were solidly, stolidly middle class. Within our walls, however, we were less complacent, a young family fraying at the edges as our financial situation grew grimmer and grimmer by the week.

In spite of our straitened circumstances, my parents retained domestics—two amahs, Sister Kwan and Sister Choon; a cook; and a part-time errand boy. I should also include the rickshaw coolie duo who served us exclusively on weekdays. Nothing would have gotten done if we hadn't had help, for Mother wouldn't leave the house and Father, a dreamy idealist, had so little interest in the physical world that he could barely remember the name of our street, let alone the location of the butcher's or the spice shop.

As a practical concession, we leased out the servants' quarters, and this little room was piled from floor to ceiling with low-quality women's sandals (and their persistent tang of cheap tannin), overstock from Mr. Wang's footwear emporium on nearby Avenue Joffre. Their space thus usurped, our servants slept anywhere they could come nighttime, on lumpy blankets by the dying embers of the kitchen brazier or crouched under the crook of

the stairs, knees tucked beneath their chins to fend off the plague. Mother assured me that to the people of the lower classes, this was still rather luxurious. Most of Shanghai, she said, lived in rat-infested shantytowns on the banks of the muck-filled Suzhou Creek or were packed like sardines inside crowded junks where only the luckiest got to lie on straw mats.

We slept on the second floor. My parents had their own room, large enough to accommodate, aside from their featherbed, a brass chamber pot and a folding screen hand-painted with a hundred cranes in midflight. I know it was meant to be a picture of serenity, but it always filled me with panic to gaze at the screen—the cranes looked as if they were fleeing some sort of catastrophe, perhaps an earthquake or a prodigiously good shot. The elder two children, Li and myself, shared a small, nondescript room adjacent to our parents', and our infant sisters, Xiaowen and Bao-Bao—strangely enough, also twins—slept in the hallway on a cot that had once belonged to a consumptive great-aunt. Nobody wanted to say that she died in that rickety thing, but the stains on the mattress seemed to me brutal evidence.

Hanging on the wall above the twins' cot was an oil portrait of our parents on their wedding day, as wide as a broadsheet and nestled in a gilded frame. They were outfitted in the latest Western styles—he in a suit with a cravat, strangely dashing in his quiet way, and she in white lace, looking waxier than usual, as if she had been carved out of a huge candle and then dredged through powders and rouge. Her mind seemed to be elsewhere and her lips were crooked with a kind of half smile. An unhelpful aunt must have told her this was the proper way to pose. This image of Mother I found disturbing. Her eyes followed me whenever I crossed the hall, accusing eyes that seemed to know even before I did that I would someday disappoint.

Unlike her mother, who'd been a celebrated Suzhou beauty in a city famed for its beauties, Mother's charms weren't self-evident. There was a bit of the tadpole about her—bulging eyes, weak chin—and to disguise the fact, she spent hours arranging and rearranging her hair and face before every lunch or cocktail invitation. Much to the puzzlement of new friends and the exasperation of old ones, she nearly always decided at the very last minute that she couldn't leave the house and would forgo the meetings. Friendships suffered, and so did her confidence.

Over the years, her fear and poor self-image had worked so well in tandem, each reinforcing the other's sinister hold, that they completely crippled her social life. She turned her attentions by sad default to the running of the household, becoming a quarrelsome matron who rose at six and dressed for nonexistent balls, all for the purpose of ordering the help around. From the way she screamed at the amahs and steamed around the house, I sensed that her quirks frustrated her deeply. Her great concern was that our neighbors would never think of her as anything but well put together and of us as anything but angelic and that they'd never suspect the awful truth that we were, alas, a struggling little ragtag troupe headed by a pseudo-intellectual whose station in life as a schoolteacher meant that we'd never in a thousand years be rich.

Father plodded through his role as paterfamilias. I remember him as having a perpetually pursed mouth, his thin lips pressed firmly together lest the fried fish roiling in his gut came leaping out. The idea of family made him queasy in general, the reality of it even more so. He'd wring his hands like a woman whenever the twins started bawling; then he'd either go out for a long walk or put on a record—opera in German usually, a language he didn't understand and therefore felt unburdened by. Looking back, I don't think poor Father was ever prepared for the size of our household—not just the aggrieved, high-maintenance wife but also additional headaches in the form of four children and a rotating roster of resentful servants. This was a storklike gent who preferred to be left alone and might have been best suited to the life of a medieval scholar-prince, emerging from his pavilion once in a blue moon to stretch his skinny legs, stroke his beard, and sip Huangshan Mao Feng tea harvested by an obedient band of snow monkeys. Yes, in a different universe, Father would have been sitting atop a craggy mountain memorizing obsolete tracts on thousand-year-old scrolls instead of mopping up vomit or worrying about grocery bills.

It may surprise you, then, to hear that my parents were considered very much a modern couple. They had married out of choice, back when the rest of the continent still abided by matches devised by Machiavellian fathers and meddling aunts—two goats if you'll take her off my hands, and all that. They must have once thought they were in love. Sadly, untutored as they were in the demands of romantic commitment, they'd each picked for themselves their worst possible match. Father ran cold, Mother ran hot,

but their yin and their yang were grossly misaligned. Marital calamity has been built on far less.

That our parents made an odd couple was obvious even to us. Idiosyncratic, yes; inattentive, to be sure. Yet their odd union produced me, my twin, and the other twins. The baby girls Xiaowen and Bao-Bao made up for our parents' character flaws twice over. Fuzzy of forehead and forearm, the pink-cheeked pair sang and romped around every day, satin ribbons fluttering in their hair. They were my mascots, my greatest allies in the house, and their presence made me infinitely happy. I convinced myself that they were the magical Peach Children of old folklore, with supple fruit flesh that made them seven and a half times more adorable than their human counterparts as well as impervious to all mortal danger, so long as they stayed together.

We all hold on to what we can, I suppose. In those days, I clung to the idea of the twins' innocence and purity, and they clung to my legs as I prepared for school every morning, chanting in duet, "*Jie jie*, don't go! *Jie jie*, don't leave us!" They wanted to keep me at home with them, where they could shield me from danger with their downy little arms. I always left for school with a heaviness in my heart. They weren't just blindly echoing Mother's words about the dangers of the world. In their way, the twins were reminding me so I wouldn't grow too bold and forget: I wasn't the hero of my own story. Not yet.

Li went upstairs to find Mother. I followed. We whimpered and moaned shamelessly and found glee in it. Why did we persist in antagonizing her? Mother asked. Maybe in the autumn, she said, but not now. It's summer. Who knows what deadly germs are lurking in the air? And, anyway, couldn't we find our fun indoors?

So find our fun indoors we did, at least for a while. We were sufficiently unattended. Father was teaching school; Mother was shouting at the amahs upstairs. The cook was having her siesta, dozing upright in her rattan chair, and the errand boy, as usual, was nowhere to be found. Each potential deterrent thus accounted for, we crept into Father's study—a room no bigger than a broom closet and even more cramped—and went to his precious goldfish. The pair were named Wu Song and Wu Dalang, after two brothers in Father's favorite classic novel *Water Margin*. Li dropped ten garlic

cloves into the water, which the goldfish pounced on with their greedy, sucking mouths. Then, with nervous titters, we waited.

As expected, the first bubbles emerged from Wu Song's tail, his plumbing being quicker. These were followed by more robust ones that took both goldfish by surprise. Air shot out their rear ends, sending them forth like rockets. Luminous projectiles! Both fish banged their stunned faces into the glass. The bigger the emission, the stronger the collision. *Phoot! Thump! Phoooot! Thuuummpp!* Li had fed them garlic many times before, yet they fell for the trick without fail, over and over. After a few minutes, the flatulence wore off, and Wu Song and Wu Dalang resumed their mindless circuits. It was as if nothing had ever happened. Li grew restless again.

Mother was in the midst of writing a letter, but we were merciless in our demands. Exhausted by Li's doleful pantomime of gazing out the window and my extravagant sighs, she finally relented.

She called in Sister Kwan. "Take them straight to the park and only the park. At no time should you ever let go of their hands. And keep them out of the sun!"

As Sister Kwan nodded, I saw the tears well up in her beady Cantonese eyes. She was so easily intimidated, the poor girl. I wanted to tell her that Mother was all bark and no bite but felt it wasn't my place; it seemed disloyal to side with the help. The other amah, Sister Choon, older and grimmer, was to remain home and watch the twins. I still remember the scowl on her face as she locked the front door behind us.

As we walked, I asked Li, "But why the park?"

"I wanted to test Mother."

"Why?"

"To see if she really loves me."

"Does she?"

He gave me a look I couldn't decipher.

Like many green spaces in Frenchtown, the *Paradis des Enfants* was immaculately manicured and easy on the eye. The only difference was that everything in it was scaled for tots, and to a perverse degree: All the shrubs were within crawlers' reach, all the flowers short enough for the tiniest petal-sniffing *enfant*. The Parisian-style gas lamps came up only to Sister Kwan's chin, and the benches similarly favored the wee. Nothing loomed too tall, not even the trees—those that grew higher than six feet had their

heads lopped off. The whole place was safe, sedate, a mini Versailles ready to receive the woozy tumbles of wobbly footed babes.

The two brief times we'd been taken to the *Paradis*, we always eyed the European youngsters of our district skipping along in their starched sailor suits, licking ices and lollipops while amahs of all ages skittered after them, pleading with them in pidgin to *no runnee*. Today was no exception. The pampered little devils were out in force, terrorizing pigeons with high-pitched roars and tucking sweet wrappers into the mulberry bush.

I observed Li watching them. In the center of the park stood a circular rose garden enclosed behind a formidable fence that barred "All Chinese and Dogs." Even though Sister Kwan had explained that this was for *our* safety—"Those red roses are fed on the blood of Chinese children!"—Li's jealousy was evident. He stalked and stared. I felt envy for the foreigners, too, but mine was different. Many of the children were roaming unsupervised, and it made me realize that never in my seven years of life had I walked, let alone run, in any public place without some zealous grownup holding on to my hand until it was slick with sweat, as if I would suddenly disappear the instant they let go. This, I felt, rather than size and complexion, was the crucial divider between the Chinese and the Europeans: Their hands were always free.

While the privileged thronged in and out of the rose garden, we stayed on the commons. We made our own fun. Sister Kwan was given to dizzy spells, and we had a fairly good idea of how to trigger one. Li and I ran rings around her like twin engines fastened to her wrists. Very soon, our human carousel had to sit down. She staggered to a spot under a shady Japanese maple and, much to our delight, fell unconscious with a gasp. Li and I were now alone, with a million options open to us. Should we peer into the mulberry bush and count the sweet wrappers? Should we stick leaves in Sister Kwan's hair? What should a boy freshly seven and his agreeable accomplice do?

Somebody else answered our question. A Chinese man, tanned and slim in the Southern way. He was very old, possibly the oldest person I'd ever seen, with a thousand wrinkles, a long white beard, and a black wool cape—this, at the height of summer. He had a cinnabar walking cane that he didn't seem to need because he walked well—too well, I thought, for a man his age. On his cane were intricate carvings of hundreds of couples, all

intertwined in some communal embrace that stretched from its foot right up to its handle, all in the throes of some sort of wretched ecstasy. I couldn't take my eyes off the thing.

A polished gold watch attached to a chain fell from the old man's waistcoat when he bowed to shake our grimy hands. Li lit up as soon as he saw it.

"Greetings, my little friends," the man said. He had a marvelous accent, speaking what I thought was very mandarin Mandarin, untainted by the singsong cadences of the Shanghai dialect. "I was wondering if I could ask you for a favor."

Without waiting for an answer, he began walking. I tapped Li on the arm and we looked back at Sister Kwan—still unconscious under the tree. We now followed our new leader, who walked at an unnaturally keen pace. We had to take three or four steps for every one of his. When he led us beyond the places we knew, past the rose garden and past even the hedge maze where only forbidden lovers went, I grabbed Li's hand.

All of a sudden, the man stopped in his tracks. He turned and looked directly at me. "Do not be afraid." It was an order, not friendly reassurance. "How will you ever discover new things if you're always fearful? Fear is our greatest enemy."

Li shook my hand off and glowered at me. "He's right, you know." Turning seven seemed to have given him the illusion of awesome power. Normally I would have kicked him in the shins to remind him I was still his older sister, but we were in unfamiliar waters. We were following a strange man. And this strange man was leading us deeper and deeper into the unknown. I now hoped that Sister Kwan would wake up and come charging after us.

We came to a small, dark, windowless hut, perhaps a gardener's shed, on the far edge of the park. I could tell from the height of its door that, unlike everything else in the *Paradis des Enfants*, this hut was sized for grownups, and quite unapologetically so. A huge, old-fashioned padlock secured the rusty handle, and I was grateful that the old man showed no interest in disturbing it. Then my heart sank. Behind the hut was a stone wall about ten feet high. If anything went wrong, there'd be no escape.

The dank, fecal odor of fertilizer hung in the air, much like the sewer, only denser and more beastly. I scanned the area. Nobody else was around.

The laughter of children sounded as tinny as mosquitoes, and incredibly far away. My stomach tightened and again I reached for Li's hand.

"We should go back," I whispered, hoping the old man wouldn't hear.

But of course he heard me. Sighing, he shook his head, then addressed Li and Li alone: "Young man, you seem like a leader. Don't let the girl fill your mind with fear. I need you to be brave and strong. You must not disappoint me."

It was then that we heard the baby's cries. They were coming distinctly from the dark hollow between the hut and the wall, a space of uncommon darkness. The man lifted a finger—wait here—and went toward the source. We stood still, exchanging anxious glances.

After a while, the man called, "Young man . . ."

Instantly, Li went.

I had no choice but to follow. As much as I dreaded seeing the baby, being left all by myself seemed even more frightening. Out of the sun and into the shadows, the temperature dropped.

Our eyes took a moment to adapt to the lack of light. At our feet was a shallow rain gutter, lined with velvety black moss. It felt like we were suddenly in a cave. The baby's wails increased in pitch and intensity, as if it could sense our approach and wanted us to hurry.

The hairs on my arms stood up and my pulse quickened. In the drain lay a quivering gray puddle. I saw its watery blue eyes and froze.

It was a kitten, not much bigger than a ball of yarn. Its fur was frayed, exposing snatches of baldness, and its hind legs were bent in such a way that I could tell they had been broken in several places.

"The handiwork of neighborhood thugs," the man said, sighing again. "Boys from the countryside with nothing better to do." For a moment I felt his grief. He said that the kitten belonged to him and that its name was Xiao Huangdi, or *Little Emperor*. "My heart aches to see it in such obscene agony. I want nothing more than to end its suffering. To bring it the peace it deserves. It's only right. But you see, young man"—he turned to Li—"this is a job for a child's hands."

Like a soldier reporting to his general, Li pulled away from me and took three steps toward the trench. In that moment, I felt the lifelong connection between us, our bond of blood that I'd always taken for granted, not merely slip away but *snap*. A clammy uncertainty was left in its wake. For

the first time in my life, I felt completely, horribly alone. The nausea came at me in waves and was suffocating, endless. I choked back the urge to throw up.

Calmly—too calmly—Li got on his haunches and examined the kitten. Just as casually, he placed his hands on the creature's head, caressed its tiny ears, and then lifted it by the loose flap of skin on the back of its neck. The pitiful thing sensed peril and swiped at the air, swaying like a ragged pendulum. It mewed for its life; it was begging, desperate. How could Li not see this? How could he not hear this? Instead he gave the old man a quiet smile, as if posing for one last photograph with his beloved pet.

"Please, sir, tell me what to do," Li said. His eagerness to please sickened me even more. His voice was as sweet as treacle.

The kitten looked toward me. Tears fell from its eyes. If someone had told me then that it had a human soul, I would have believed him absolutely. These were not the eyes of a dumb animal but the pleading eyes of a sentient, intelligent creature tragically aware of what was happening and yet unable to stop it. It was an accident of size, of species, that the kitten could not fight back. But the feelings were no different. I would see those eyes time and time again during the course of my career. The eyes of someone dying alone and terrified.

"Brother, don't!" I yelled. Li did not respond. He'd either grown deaf or I had become irrelevant. "Don't hurt it! Please!"

The old man continued watching Li. In a flat, unemotional voice, he said, "Break its neck. Quick but firm."

My brother nodded, matching his solemnity.

The kitten fought at the nothingness as Li's fingers closed around its neck. My brother, murdering an innocent being with the same soft hands I'd held just minutes before. A child's hands.

I couldn't allow it. I lunged forth with all my might, aiming to snatch the kitten from him but instead I found myself hurtling onto the grass yards away. The old man. I never saw his arm move.

The kitten's mewling grew muffled, but its terror was undiluted. I picked myself up and screamed one long piercing scream to cover up the horror. Even so, I heard its tiny neck snap with a crisp click. An unnerving hush followed. When I peered at Li, the lump of gray fur had gone slack in his hands. He let the lifeless bundle fall to the ground.

The old man nodded at him with avuncular approval and pulled from his pocket a small disk wrapped in shimmering gold foil. I knew at a glance that it was butterscotch candy, the kind we'd ogled in shop windows but were told was too expensive to be wasted on children like us.

"Young man, I want to thank you for your time. And your courage." The man handed the reward to Li, who accepted it gratefully. He then turned to me with a supercilious smile. "Nothing for you."

Usually Li would have protested on my behalf, but this time he didn't.

Lowering himself to the drain with great agility, the man scooped up the dead kitten in the palm of his hand. In one seamless motion, he folded up its legs and tucked the carcass into his pants pocket like a used handkerchief. With the same soiled hand, he patted Li on the head, his fingers slithering through the forest of my brother's hair before finding a comfortable hold and kneading his scalp. Li closed his eyes and tilted his head back.

When he opened his eyes, his features went slack, as if he'd been blessed. I will never forget that look, that taint.

The man waved at the distance and smiled. "You are now free to go."

Li turned to me. There was a new coldness to his face that I didn't like. I found myself wishing we hadn't disobeyed Mother, that we hadn't caused Sister Kwan to faint. But for the first time in my life, I couldn't share those feelings with him.

"Don't you dare say a word." He made me swear as we ran, him clutching the butterscotch disk like a prized talisman. "And don't expect me to share this with you."

He needn't have worried. I wanted none of it. I did, however, want my brother back.

Running to the commons, I had to keep slowing down to wait for Li. The violence seemed to have sapped his vigor, for he paused every so often to catch his breath. Gray rings appeared around his eyes, the kind I often saw in hungry beggar children. And his scent, too, turned strange. No longer did he smell of chalk, of cleanliness; he now smelled slightly off, like rice vinegar. Could the same thing be happening to me? Could turning seven mean having less energy and a new odor? But no, I was running at my usual pace and smelled like my usual self. These changes seemed to be occurring only in Li.

When we returned to where we'd left Sister Kwan, she was hoarse from

shrieking our names, her eyes rimmed red with worry. Her bun had come undone, leaving streaks of black hair plastered to her tear-stained cheeks. For the first time, I realized how pretty she actually was. In a different, perhaps better world, she would have been a rich man's plaything. When she saw us, she clutched us to her chest and I felt the shivers coursing through her. Her shaking masked mine.

Sister Kwan never told Mother about her fainting spell or our little detour. Most crucial of all, I kept my oath—I never breathed a word to anyone about the old man or the kitten. Or the sweet. To everyone apart from Li and me, and maybe the invisible guardians of the cosmos, that encounter never happened at all.

Why do I mention the guardians of the cosmos? Well, because that night, following the day my twin and I became two separate people, was also the night I saw my first ghost.