

PART
ONE

ENTER

HIS LARGE BALCONY BECAME OUR favorite place for seclusion, candid exchange of ideas, but most of all, our private sanctum. It bore witness to some of our most meaningful moments. Here, many of our ideas, hopes, and aspirations took wing or fell through. It was a place where we celebrated our successes or despaired over our failures. Whether our friendship was in harmony or discord, it was here on the balcony that much of it unfurled, developed and made it into what it is today.

When I walked into his study and gauged its mood, the inimitable image of my best friend, Saul Poliakov, sat slumped over his well-worn typewriter working feverishly as if there were no tomorrow. I bought it for him back in 1959 just after he graduated from uni in English literature. I was killing two birds with one stone since a week later it was also his twenty second birthday. It was, of course, a symbolic present and, after he had left the newspaper job, he began writing on it his very first novel, *The DEADLY TRIO*. Although not a smashing success, it proved to be a good opening gambit into this demanding and competitive field.

I guess this afternoon was yet another one of his vain attempts at coming to grips with himself and the problems that plagued him.

The space around him was cluttered with papers, letters and notes as he looked up at me with eyes of despair. He was working on his latest novel, his thirteenth, and as usual, expected me to share with him the pangs of agony and frustration. Knowing him well, he's expecting me to blend in with his gloom.

His oversized desk seemed like a depository of his past and present, inundated with trivial and unimportant stationary or urgent matters that needed his immediate attention. Saul typically couldn't be bothered to distinguish which was which and didn't seem to care much either. When you ventured into his dim sanctum, as very few dared and fewer still enjoyed doing, you had to watch out you didn't trip over something or other and disrupt a world whose disarray suited it. Saul's study was enormous, but because of the mess, moving through it was like finding your way through a maze.

Saul's father, Josef Poliakov, bought the spacious house as a wedding gift, right after his son's marriage to Fay. What attracted him most, even more than the swanky neighborhood, was the unusual size and beauty of the study. Saul found the space awe-inspiring and after measuring its length and breadth, told me that it had almost perfect proportions, something about its having the GOLDEN PROPORTION. It enabled him to stretch out, spread his wings with tons of room to accommodate his growing hobby of collecting antiquated typewriters.

The space had good acoustics and enabled him to throw things around and still feel its more than roomy feeling!

He was enraptured by the comfort it gave him. When old Josef showed the property to his son, it was the immense study and balcony overlooking Sydney Harbor that clinched the deal. Saul's father paid through the nose to get it for the young couple, and wallowed in the ingratiating remarks of his friends when they found out about its location and how much it had cost him. The rest of the house, with the possible exception of his bedroom, was functional and attractive but of marginal importance as far as Saul was concerned. Marginal because Saul spent practically all of his time in his immense study where he could relax, create and agonize over his present life in general, and his newest novel in particular.

In spite of its age, some eighty-odd years, periodic maintenance and putting in a magnificent glass wall on the northern façade, it has hardly changed since his father bought it for him. Overall, one could say that it had retained its original splendor and dignified appearance. Besides being Saul's refuge, due to our immutable friendship, it has, to a great extent, become also mine; a frequent and comforting retreat. A home away from home!

Two elongated walls—close to ten meters—with no windows and two six-meter walls at both ends of the room formed that perfect rectangle of golden proportions, whose value Saul kept expounding. The wall on the left was from weathered brick whose white and grayish stains were its charm, and gave a rustic charm to the large expanse. A four-meter high, coffered wooden ceiling sloped gently downwards from the entrance towards the three-meter high north wall that

opened up to one of the most beautiful harbors in the world.

When one opened the impressive oak door, the slightly curved wall opposite it was all glass. It was truly overwhelming to see that magnificent panoramic view of Sydney Harbor. The undulating coast and the blue waters below were peppered with yachts. On the opposite side, lay the Taronga Zoological Park and the luscious vegetation that engulfed it. In the west was the, “Coat Hanger” (Harbor Bridge) and at its feet the distinctive white shells of the Sydney Opera House—Australia’s proud icon.

Right after their marriage, Saul insisted on tearing down the original north wall with its four elongated windows and narrow door. In its place, he wanted a floor to ceiling glass wall that would do justice to the breathtaking view beyond it. He was right, of course, to have made the decision and, in spite of Fay’s objections, got his way.

Being his “private architect,” he gave me the assignment of planning and supervising the work. It was a costly and difficult undertaking, primarily because of the municipality. They claimed that exhibiting such an “up-beat” and modern façade—especially facing the harbor—clashed with the conservative and historical nature of the surrounding houses. Old Josef with his money and political ties took care of the bureaucratic problems in no time and, despite of the neighbors’ vehement objections, petitions and jealousy, the project got underway.

As it turned out, I was rather dismayed that after all the

trouble and work, we were all exposed to the magnificent glass façade for no more than two years. Right after Fay gave birth to their first child Miriam, the whole scene metamorphosed, and a curtain of gloom fell on the glass façade and family.

He looked forward to having a son, enabling him to dote on him as his father had done on him. Since his daughter’s birth, Saul insisted on the heavy opaque curtains being closed almost all of the time. Horrifically, their closure initiated for him a state of mourning as if they draped him in a self-imposed misery because of his daughter’s birth. With the heavy drapes closed, the room was blind-folded and acquired a depressive gloom. Its character and its décor mirrored his present temperament and rather morose personality. It seemed an appropriate backdrop to his frequent bouts with despair and occasional depression. Saul was the only one who could tolerate its rather solemn atmosphere with equanimity. He loved the security it gave him because of its familiar intimacy, and in spite of its immense size he could easily embrace it without feeling rejected. The room was bathed in its ominous shadows and helped obscure Saul’s mood. The room and he blended perfectly—a monochrome of nostalgia and gloom. I couldn’t imagine him anywhere else. By now, he and his study became inseparable, and I came to regard them as such. It almost seemed as if the space and he had an osmotic relationship. An indivisible entity with all its countless items that, over the years, had somehow coagulated into a solidified whole.

He seldom drew the heavy drapes. They seemed to symbolize a curtain that had fallen and closed a chapter of his life. He allowed no one else to go near them except his granddaughter, Tessy and me and, even that, he accepted rather reluctantly and quite seldom.

When Saul was in one of his rare good moods and after certain prodding, we would pull open the heavy drapes and liberate the space from its depressive and imposed gloom. Bathed by the luxury of the scenery beyond, the room suddenly burst into life, acquiring a completely different character. Routinely, we would open a glass door that led to the long and wide balcony, carrying two glasses and a bottle of red wine. That invariably evoked our common experiences and countless discussions. We would sit in silence for a while, sipping on our wine as we looked at each other and gradually felt ourselves sinking into a past that we both shared and was rapidly dimming. We also talked about our present life, and its frailties, which wasn't so much dimming as diminishing at a rate neither of us could reconcile and had problems handling.

By now we were both accomplished professionals, basking in our achievements. He was no James Joyce, and I had no illusions about my talents as an architect, either. Saul was an imaginative writer but certainly no innovator. He wrote compelling and very readable novels and enjoyed their wide acceptance. I was no Frank Lloyd Wright, but had acquired a certain reputation for my eccentricity and the way

it manifested itself in my buildings. Nothing awe-inspiring, but certainly imbued with an indisputable originality.

Next year he and I will celebrate sixty years of our friendship. I knew Saul well with all his mannerisms and idiosyncrasies. We have traveled a long and winding journey together, occasionally taking long detours and sometimes drifting apart, but, as always, we remain as inseparable as he and his study.

Often we lost our way, and there was a hiatus in our connection, but now as I look at his drooping form, frail health, and immersion in his newest novel, I smile and feel lucky to have met him, still to be with him and continue enjoying his unique friendship.

He hated leaving the warmth and comfort that these tall and decorated walls gave him. Unlike the outside world which he regarded as somewhat threatening, this was his accommodating domain and sanctuary. He entered it with composure and relief, without fear of meeting someone or something unfamiliar. It was all there where he had placed it, or thrown it.

Thousands of records, both classical and jazz, lay snuggled on a shelf above his latest B&O stereo equipment—his pride and joy. We still spend hours listening to the familiar sounds of the swing era. A library filled with hundreds of books took up most of the wall on the right.

He quickly and easily succumbed to all these familiar surroundings, sensations, and odors that were entirely of his

making. Nothing in it overwhelmed him, unless he inadvertently picked up one of the many family albums portraying his past. These mostly elicited his annoying recollections. Consequently he seldom addressed their content and made sure they remained in some secluded corner gathering dust and out of his way.

I found it very strange that he had changed so much, from an energetic, enthusiastic, and athletic youth to a reclusive individual mired in an indolence and apathy entirely of his design. Since our common adolescence, I remember well how important the albums once were to him. He called them MY LIFE. Thick and heavy scrapbooks that contained not only photos and personal artifacts, but momentous events that had transpired during our lives. He devoted hours to sticking into them photos, documents, sport certificates and such. They were very heavy, and when I asked Saul about that, he explained that it was his means of ensuring that they would be treated with respect.

Saul was basically conservative, a romantic at heart who insisted on subordinating form to matter. Consequently, I thought it rather weird that now these thick albums were abandoned, collected dust and suffered his willful neglect.

Throughout our longtime friendship, I could safely say that there were two cataclysmic events that change him and his life. By extension, they also changed mine. One was when Nataly disappeared, and the other when his daughter Miriam was born.

By now he was on his tenth scrapbook. The one that preceded it could cause a possible hernia if one ventured to lift it. There was one volume he particularly avoided opening and made sure it remained at the bottom of the pile. I guess that was because it had too many painful recollections or mementos that reawakened others. Photos relating to his numerous romantic involvements, especially the one with Nataly Freiberg. Photos from the mid-sixties, nineteen sixty-four I think, when Nataly was barely eighteen, and we were considerably older than her, Saul by nine years and I by seven.

Nataly was a sore issue and a festering wound, and he tried to relegate its significance though I knew it occupied a sheltered compartment in his mind and wasn't an issue so easily forgotten. Inadvertently, I would sometimes delve into that remote past and touch on the sensitive subject, and invariably he would be annoyed that I did. These many albums consolidated his effervescent past and at the same time elicited intense emotions that were debilitating and caused his painful frustrations. Now they were just neatly stacked albums, confined to their special place ready to be addressed and examined for their intrinsic value.

I loved browsing through their content because there was so much of my own past in them, as well. When I felt the mood was right, I often turned their pages with glee in spite of his stern objections. Sometimes, when Saul ventured out on some urgent errand and I had his study all to myself, I would start digging into his convoluted world, hoping to discover some hidden secret or an obscure artifact that he

had never revealed to me. It almost felt as if I were undressing him, exposing him to me in his entirety. Naturally being inquisitive, I also tried to find out what his latest novel was about, but he was very careful to lock that up in his safe every time he went out.

In all those years, I never uncovered anything I didn't know about. However, one day in some obscure corner of his study, I came upon a small tin box which was stashed behind some of his moldy journals and which I had never seen. Naturally, I was very excited and felt as if I had stumbled upon some great treasure. As I pried open the tight lid with scissors, I felt like young Jim from *Treasure Island* and started humming, "Fifteen men on the dead man's chest. Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!" There was no dried-up and crumpled treasure map with an "X" marked on it, but it contained his sport medals, a high school emblem that all of us had sewn on our jackets and some other trinkets that had sentimental value. As I spilled the contents on the floor, there was the silver bracelet that I recognized immediately. Saul had given one to Nataly when they started to go steady, and she had given a similar one to him. It was what kids did in those days and was a sign of mutual commitment of sorts—an imposed, though frequently transient, fidelity. I noticed that on the inside of the bracelet she had engraved:

**TO MY BELOVED SAULI WITH ALL OF MY LOVE.....
YOUR NATALY 1964**

Since Saul was nine years older than she, he found it a bit childish, but decided it was expedient to wear the bracelet. He never told me what was written on the bracelet he gave her, and I never asked. It was safe to conclude that it was a similar engraving with similar content.

I guess that happened a week or so after they met. He never mentioned to me that he still had it after all these years, something that was difficult to throw away, I supposed, that underlined his romantic nature. He wore it until that day she mysteriously disappeared from his life. The bracelet, like his sport badges, ribbons and other medals soon joined all of his sentimental memorabilia in that small box buried among the array of objects in his study.

That album at the bottom, compressed by the ones above, was, of course, my favorite. Yes, indeed, I remember her so well. I can still picture her beautiful face and the gorgeous cheek dimples that accentuated her captivating smile.

Adorable and desirable Nataly! As I handled the silver bracelet, I was wondering whether to confront Saul about it, but decided that it would be prudent not to. I was also concerned about his reaction to my impropriety, digging into a world that he had obviously wanted hidden from view.

When Nataly came on the scene back in nineteen sixty-four, we had both graduated, Saul with a B.A. in English Literature and I with a B.A. in Architecture & Town Planning. We were gingerly beginning to map out our future with the usual trepidations of youth and entering an unfamiliar scene.