OUT OF CATACLYSM AND CATASTROPHE

This book is about people like me. When I published *Heart Matters*, in 2006, many people told me they thought it was a great story and that it showed how unusual my path had been in Canada. Even close friends went out of their way to say that they thought my story was different from anything anyone else had experienced in Canada. My immediate reaction was to disagree. All of my life, I've met people who have lived trajectories not exactly like mine but in their own way, just as remarkable. Like me, the people in this book came out of cataclysm and catastrophe not of their own making and found themselves almost thrown into Canada. And what did Canada do? Canada took us in, and our real lives began. I told my story because I wanted people to identify with it and realize that they, too, had come a long way. I wanted to show that the goals they may never have thought possible, proved attainable because they were Canadian.

The people I write about were almost surprised by the way their lives turned out. They had worked hard to succeed and they are a very accomplished group, but what happened to them could

only have happened because of their being uprooted and forcibly transplanted to another place. That this place was Canada was very fortuitous. People in every society—whether it is France, which I know well, or Britain, or the United States—can succeed. But there is something particular about Canada, with its atmosphere of benevolent neglect, of letting people alone, that makes it possible for those who arrive with nothing to sense that they can belong and be part of something they can help to construct.

What follows is a simple account of immigrant experiences at the beginning of the twenty-first century, of people who would have died or suffered terribly, and certainly never would have come to the true fullness of their development, had they not been taken in by Canada. These people are immigrants like me. Some of them are refugees like me. All of them depended very much on the kindness of strangers to be taken in and allowed to make their way.

These are stories not just of survival, but of people who had very little choice and had to make the best of what was offered. Whether this meant being picked up in an airplane in Hong Kong and landing in Edmonton in the middle of winter, or being flown from Santiago to Vancouver after a military coup, or fetching up in Montreal as a deserter from the U.S. Army—all of them, like me, were driven here by forces that were out of their control.

Heart Matters was my story—the story of how our family came to Canada with one suitcase each, having been chosen almost at random to board a ship that was part of the Red Cross exchange of civilians on the two sides of the Pacific War. We came to Ottawa and made our way thanks to my father getting a job in the Canadian government. But we really made our way thanks to the people we met by chance and thanks to my parents' enormous strength of character—my father's humour, resilience, and intelligence, and

my mother's sensitivity, perfectionism, and struggle against depression. With that guidance and their terrific alertness to all of their surroundings, they sacrificed and saved so that my brother and I could go to university—in his case McGill, to become a doctor, and in mine, Trinity College at the University of Toronto, which led to a career that began in television. Canada did not set up any insurmountable barriers for me. I went to a very good high school, Lisgar Collegiate, in Ottawa, and at Trinity I was able to make friends and penetrate (I think that is the right word) the heart of Canadian life, which I have inhabited ever since. The close friends I made then, at the age of eighteen, have remained part of me through all of the changes in my life.

I don't believe I ever thought I wouldn't be able to do any of this. Canada was, after all, an easy country to live in and to do well in. At first, as a child, that meant excelling at exams and getting scholarships, and later it meant being good on television and the other things that came along to challenge me. I know I wouldn't have had the same kind of life had there been no war and had we remained in Hong Kong, but for many years I didn't think to ask my father what he thought would have become of us had we been able to stay. For us, our adaptation to Canada was so important and overpowering that I wasn't even able to frame the question until about twenty years ago. When I finally did ask him, after we had eaten a quiet dinner together, he answered, "Well, if we'd stayed in Hong Kong, you would have been very clever, and I would have continued to do well in business, and so we probably would have sent you to the States to university—Radcliffe or Vassar or Wellesley." I thought about that for a while. I knew that if I had gone to one of those schools, I would have still done very well academically, but I wouldn't have ended up as Governor-General

of Canada! I might just have ended up marrying somebody rich, moving back to Hong Kong, and leading a comfortable life, perhaps immigrating to Canada in my thirties.

None of the people in this book lead lives that resemble what they would have been had they stayed in Germany, Tanzania, Ho Chi Minh City, or Belgrade. The context would have been so different that even the ones who are artists, who might still have produced their art, would not have done it in the same way. Canada gives us a wider berth and a lodging that attaches us into something larger than simply our race or our religion or even our language. I'm convinced it has to do with the geography, the space, that we inhabit and the sense that there is room for all of us.

The empathy I feel with the people in this book reflects, I think, the great bond among all Canadians. With the notable exception of the Aboriginal peoples, we are all immigrants to this country. Our history of immigration has been chequered. At the turn of the twentieth century, we opened our gates and tried to include and welcome people—particularly in the West, where we took in more than a hundred thousand immigrants a year, culminating in the astonishing number of four hundred thousand in 1913. After the Second World War, we did the same, and since the 1980s we have been increasing our population by one percent a year with immigrants from all countries of the world. But these were also years when we passed legislation to restrict immigration, such as discouraging Chinese people from entering Canada at the beginning of the twentieth century by inflicting the notorious Head Tax, the attempt to disinherit the Doukhobors from the land that they had worked and made fruitful for ten years, and our shameful refusal to take in Jews who we knew were being

persecuted in the 1930s. But we have been able to change, and it is that ability that distinguishes Canada from many other countries in the world. Once we decided that we were going to be inclusive, we did it without reservation.

Today, in any citizenship ceremony in Canada (and we have 2,900 of them a year), if there are forty-nine new citizens taking the oath, they will come, on average, from twenty-five different countries in the world. This astounding feat is not matched by any other country in the world. Eighty percent of the people who come to Canada take up citizenship. This is the highest rate in the world; the rate is only sixty percent in the United States and seventy-five percent in Australia. People take up citizenship here because they know, after having lived here for three to five years, that we want them to be citizens. We don't declare love to them, because that is not what Canadians do, but they see that they will be at ease here, able to live their lives relatively free of rejection and stereotypes.

When I represented Ontario in France as Agent General in the mid-1980s, I talked to a lot of French politicians about the benefits of our country. The leader of one of the centrist parties in France, the UDF, once said to me indignantly, "Of course, you can afford to take any amount of immigrants. Canada is already a mongrelized country!" I think he's right, and I don't take it as an insult; we should not be ashamed of this. We have drawn strength from all the different people who have come here, even though our bureaucratic policies have shifted back and forth, from exclusionary to inclusive.

We should be mindful and proud of what the most important figures in our democratic past have said to us about immigration. In 1840, Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine, who would later become the first democratically chosen Canadian prime minister, said in his Address to the Electors of Terrebonne:

> Canada is the land of our ancestors; it is our country as it must be the adopted country of the various populations which come from diverse portions of the globe, to make their way into its vast forests as the future resting place of their families and their hopes. Like us, their paramount desire must be the happiness and prosperity of Canada, as the heritage which they should endeavour to transmit to their descendants in this young and hospitable country. Above all, their children must be like ourselves, CANADIANS.

In that address 171 years ago are all the principles that Canadians live by in an immigrant society today. Look at the key phrases in it: "Adopted country," "diverse portions of the globe," "the future resting place," "their paramount desire must be the happiness and prosperity of Canada," "this young and hospitable country." Everything we cherish as a country is in that paragraph. It should be our guide as we move further into the twenty-first century, and we should acknowledge that a logical evolution has taken place because of our fundamental belief in what was first enunciated by Louis LaFontaine.

The British Canadians, many of whom were often among the earlier immigrants, were often wary of change that they feared would pull this country away from what they saw as its roots. We should not blame them for hanging on so strongly to their British heritage. It was a colonial mentality that led them to do so: the many benefits of our British heritage, such as common law, parliamentary democracy, and the rights of the individual, are ideas and practices that have helped create a solid infrastructure for our country. That framework has been tried and works with our constitution, one of the oldest and most democratic in the world; it can support the hundreds of different backgrounds that now make up Canada.

People of the world come here and fit into our geography and our heritage of governmental and social structures, but we should never think that they come with nothing. The people you are going to meet in these pages may have emerged from chaos, but they all benefited from a strong family structure and, in most cases, a vibrant extended family structure. Family blended into community in a way that strengthened individuals and made them capable of accomplishing more than they could have on their own.

When Canadians share their stories, it helps us realize that Canada is a place of individual narratives. In this regard, we are unlike countries that have maintained a monolithic status, where everyone is, or pretends to be, one thing: English, French, German. What we are developing in Canada, to the highest degree, is what the Aga Khan in his recent LaFontaine-Baldwin lecture so perceptively called the cosmopolitan ethic. We understand more and more that all immigrants to Canada have their own stories, not only from their countries, but from their villages and from their families. Immigrants bring to Canada a complexity that adds texture and richness to the total fabric of our society. As I sit on a bus or subway and look at the faces around me, I often think that each person has a story worth telling and that we should all hear. I'm telling a few of them here because they represent what the Aga Khan describes so well.

The world can be viewed from a narrow national or racial perspective, but it can also be understood as an independent whole in which each of us has a part to play. Because so many people who become Canadian citizens have memories and roots elsewhere, they can make comparisons, make judgments, help all of us to make choices. If you are brought up in one single culture with one pervasive point of view, it can be stifling. In the world of cyberspace

and instant communication, we are the best-placed people in the world to be able to communicate with each other. Because we have been diverse from the very beginning, a mix of Aboriginals, French, English, indigenous spiritualism, Protestant, and Catholic, we have been able to see ourselves as a combination of separate groups and to know what those differences were. And yet behind all of that, we in Canada have been behaving as if we really believed what Aristotle pointed out thousands of years ago: that the human race is a whole. I have come to believe this more and more as I have had occasion to be part of different extraordinary events. When I was Governor-General, giving out the Bravery Awards (which I will talk about later in the book) changed my view of what makes people do extraordinary things.

Our attachment to the wilderness is part of the legacy given to us by the indigenous peoples who guided the first French explorers and then the Hudson Bay Scots into the interior of this enormous continent through the rivers that were its arteries. This entry into the heart of the continent with the graceful welcome of the Aboriginals has, I believe, left an indelible imprint on the way we help others penetrate and become a part of a country in which nature is stronger than any one of us or any group of us. Of course, it's true that nature is stronger than all human beings everywhere, but in Canada, because of the climate and the limits on where human beings can safely live, we feel it even more acutely and it is of even greater importance.

As a result of being Governor-General for six years, I saw a need in Canada to understand why we've become the most successfully diverse country in the world. I'm thinking constantly about what it means to be a citizen of this country. I know for certain that citizenship is not about territory. Yes, of course, our territory happens to

be the second largest in the world, but defending its borders is not foremost in mind when we think of what citizenship requires of us. (We are fortunate in this, because we have only one border that we share with another country.) Instead, our notion of citizenship is based on a communal set of values and responsibilities.

Before the First World War, there were no such things as passports. In an interview I did with the historian Arnold Toynbee thirty-two years ago, he recalled that when he went to Greece in 1911 he had a beautiful piece of parchment with a red seal on it from somebody in the British Cabinet who indicated that young Mr. Toynbee was known to him and was of good character and to please let him into any country he wished to enter. That was the way it was then. With borders being drawn, citizenship came to be a label that could be used for exclusion. We are very fortunate that in Canada we are now able to make our citizenship stand for inclusion.

The people you'll meet in this book are distinct in the sense that they have reflected on who they are and what they would have become had they not come to Canada. They acknowledge, either tacitly or vocally, what they have lost, and they know and feel confident about what they have gained. In every case, what they have become in Canada is more than they could ever have achieved in their former lives.

Often their future was determined by the direction their parents wanted them to take and the sacrifices that were made for them; they acknowledge that legacy. I share that appreciation with them. My parents gave me the will and the determination and

the confidence to face a new world. They could not possibly have known that Canada would be as negotiable and as welcoming as it turned out to be. With the Vietnamese boat people the Trans, the Mohameds from East Africa, the Sitsabaiesans from Sri Lanka, I share that amazement in the confidence and optimism of my parents. I honestly do not know if I possess that kind of strength.

When I was little, I would often talk to my parents about our coming to Canada and what the voyage had been like. (One of my earliest memories is of seeing a whale on that trip across the Atlantic between South Africa and Brazil.) We arrived in a place that was completely unknown to us, just one small family with a lot of past, a little luggage, and a questionable future. My mother and father are like all the parents I talk about in this book: the mother who sold underwear in occupied Belgium, the father who worked in a box factory in Calgary, the mother who was a maid in hotels, and the father who lost money investing in a motel. I can identify with all of that and want to emphasize that we share this pattern: one generation sets its mind to make sure that the next one can do better. Jung says that the most powerful dynamics in the family are the unrealized dreams of the parents. If this was apparent to Jung when he was dealing with middle-class Swiss people, how much more true is it of immigrant families who have lost everything but survived with their hearts and imaginations intact.

The people in these portraits range in age from twenty-nine to seventy-six, and so I believe that as immigrants they came to two very different Canadas. I came to Canada in the 1940s, as did Fred Bild, to a country that had known terrible poverty during the Depression, then suffered through a world war, before things improved economically for all its people in the 1950s. The Canada I grew up in was much poorer than today, but we were all in the

same boat. My family didn't have a car until I was twelve, but that was true of so many of the other kids at school that I didn't notice we didn't have one. The general lack of affluence was a shared way of life. Clothes were either made at home by my mother on her sewing machine or bought during two shopping expeditions a year, one for winter and one for summer—two pairs of shoes, two sweater sets, three skirts, and an overcoat for school. It didn't seem as if we were sacrificing anything, and perhaps that made it easier for us to be immigrants. Most of today's immigrants see an enormous gap between the standard of living where they came from and the material well-being that many of us take for granted in this country and, more disturbingly, feel we are entitled to.

The people in this book have all had to struggle, and all became successful. But I didn't pick them because they were successes; they intrigue me. They represent the variety of world events that propel immigrants here and the kind of choices that face us. And I wanted to tell their stories because of the dignity and imagination and, yes, the courage with which they faced their crises and made their choices. That is the immigrant story: dignity, imagination, and courage before overwhelming events and limited choices. The one fascinating anomaly are the Blairs, an anglophone family with roots two hundred years deep in Quebec, who decided very consciously to become bicultural and bilingual and who feel that Quebec belongs to them as much as to any "pure laine" Quebecer. They did not want to be excluded, so they did everything possible to be included. They faced what to them was the possible disaster of Quebec separating from Canada and made a choice.

The idea of Canada as refuge is an undercurrent in all these stories. People like my family came to this country because they had nothing and, in many cases, no other choice. Even those young

American men seeking to escape service in the Vietnam War felt that they could risk losing their country forever in order to follow their conscience, that what they would be doing in Vietnam would not be right and they had little choice but to leave. This consciousness of knowing that we all start from nothing is the basis of our egalitarianism. We don't begin with a lofty concept. It is in discovering that we can make our place here and not be blocked that helps us immigrants know we are on the same footing as our fellow Canadians. I believe that that conscious egalitarianism is one of the reasons why citizenship has always been encouraged for our immigrants. Our government has usually been wise enough to want our immigrants to become citizens and to have a stake in the country. It began 230 years ago, when our colonial administration gave land to the tens of thousands of refugee Loyalists. This was still going on through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century with the land given to settlers to make that stake material and eventually prosperous. But this egalitarian idea is also somehow more abstract in its concept of freedom and the ability to learn and to change ourselves without resorting to civil conflict. As a country, we have largely escaped internecine and civil war. In 170-odd years of history since we became a country, eighty people have been killed in civil strife. And of that number, most were killed in one day in the 1880s, during the conflict of Louis Riel's North-West Rebellion.

I feel that Canadians' reluctance to kill each other is a critical subtext in the understanding of our society and values. We are warriors when we need to be, and have proved that in the First and Second World Wars and in the Korean War. And we are very good peacekeepers. But we have never been very good at killing each other. The presence in Canada of French and English, Protestant

and Catholic, which in Europe was enough to create bloodbaths, does not seem to have incited us to physical violence. Instead, we have given equal rights to both language groups and religions, and we fight our battles with words and referenda.

This kind of complexity has made it possible for us to become the kind of country we are—open, tolerant, and basically trusting. All of these positive values require effort to maintain. They do not come altogether naturally, but we have, in our understated way, preserved them, and intrinsically we trust them. We have also developed the ability of recognition. In a society where we are all so different from each other, people want to be recognized for what they are, not for what other people see them to be. This is crucial to an individual's, as well as a nation's, sense of identity. As you read these stories, you will see how some of these people were perceived by others and how they dealt with that positive or negative reception. It is crucial that we have this recognition between individuals and also as a nation. Without it, equality becomes mere uniformity.

The philosopher Charles Taylor says, "A prolonged refusal of recognition between groups in a society can erode the common understanding of equal participation on which a functioning liberal democracy crucially depends." A democratic society needs a sense of common citizenship that is based on the recognition of the other. It's important to understand that the other exists, and that the other is not you but outside you and must be part of the society that belongs to both of you.

The Koran tells us that God could have created people with no differences between them but chose not to. "Had God pleased, He could have made of you one community but it is His wish to *test* [italics mine] you by that which He has bestowed upon you" (Koran 5:4). Our differences are not to be feared but welcomed

as opening up new avenues of consciousness. We must not deny differences either, or we will be fooling ourselves. And above all, we should not search to erase differences; they challenge us to learn about ourselves through contact with others who are not like us.

People in France, Great Britain, and the United States, well-informed people who were interested in politics and who sometimes held real power, have frequently asked me, "When will it all be resolved in Canada, about Quebec? When will it all be over?" And I always reply, "It is not going to be over. We keep it going, up and down, back and forth, because we really like it that way." I know this is not a satisfying answer to those who are used to revolutions or radical movements solving their political problems. But Canadians have absorbed complexity—two languages, two religions, for starters—to such an extent that living with ambiguity, vexation, and some measure of discomfort is acceptable, and even desirable, to us. There will always be a profound longing in Quebec to be acknowledged by the rest of the world, and the rest of Canada, as an independent and separate entity. It is a constant expression of an inchoate, passionate sense of being. I do not believe it will ever "be over," either as a feeling or as a political position. We who are not Quebecers have to understand this, even as we are alternately annoyed, upset, and exasperated by it. I look on it as basically a family situation in which the various members of that family accept that they each have their own particular qualities. One of them might be the one who always brings up an awkward question at dinner, or the one who always prefers to leave family get-togethers early, or the one who always borrows the car. We are like a family, and our irritations and unhappiness with each other are like those of a family. That is the only way I think it makes sense for Canadians: to look at the totality of Canada with Quebec

as part of it. I also believe that our ability to live with unresolved questions makes us conscious that not everybody is alike. I think this is valuable because it adds another layer to our complexity. We may feel irritated by the fact that not everything runs smoothly in our federation, but that makes us more sensitive to what other people are saying and forces us to pay attention.

This ability to understand that society is not just a multiplication of you but includes many who are not like you is vital to a healthy society. This is what we are given a chance to do in Canada, because we see so many people who are not like ourselves, who do not come from the same background. We must search for our common humanity, for the decency, the understanding, and the generosity that must come before making judgments.

We have to understand that this Canadian condition can help us to enlarge our imaginations. Northrop Frye said, "We participate in society by means of our imagination or the quality of our social vision. Our vision of what our society is, what it could be, and what it should be, are all structures of metaphor, because the metaphor is the unit of all imagination. Logical thinking in this field seldom does more than rationalize these metaphorical visions." So we participate. And we see that by having other people participate, even though they're not like us, they have made us a better country.

These are stories of people who have come out of situations in which they were marginalized and sometimes subjected to prejudice and bigotry. Our job in Canada is to try to make sure that nobody, no matter where they are from, is ever the object of any of this. Not only do we want them to pursue their own lives and make their own choices, but we want them to be able to take their place within our society, to learn our values as they have evolved,

and most important of all, to add their contribution to society as it changes. And this too is important: that their contribution may make a change that we would never have thought of ourselves and initially might even feel uncomfortable with. We must understand that there are going to be differences and that we have to listen to each other and find out how we can work together to make sure that as long as we are within our democratic heritage we can let them be as they will let us be. Canada is at its best when it offers benevolent neglect so that people find themselves, sometimes stumbling but without obstacles put in their way.

Everybody wants to be included. That is the most important thing for anyone in this country. I do not believe it when people say that certain ethnic or religious groups don't want to be included, that they prefer to live separately. The only reason they could possibly have for not wanting to be included is that they feel so totally excluded that they can't think of how to make the effort to be included. That notion of inclusion is part of our Aboriginal heritage, and it is the Aboriginal people who were able to include us. Chief John Kelly said thirty years ago, "As the years go by, the circle of the Ojibwa gets bigger and bigger. Canadians of all colours and religions are entering that circle. You might feel that you have roots somewhere else, but in reality, you are right here with us."

In 1905, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, the country's first French-Canadian prime minister, gave a speech on the occasion of Alberta and Saskatchewan entering Confederation. At this time, the prairie provinces were filling up with a different type of immigrant: people from Eastern Europe, and also religious minorities like the Doukhobors, the Mennonites, the Hutterites—as diverse a group as the Britishcentric bureaucracy could ever have imagined. Laurier welcomed them with these words:

> Those who come at the eleventh hour will receive as fair treatment as those who have been here a long time … We do not anticipate, and we do not want, that any individuals should forget the land of their origin or their ancestors. Let them look to the past, but let them also look to the future: let them look to the land of their ancestors, but let them also look to the land of their children. Let them become Canadians.

It is this credo that we have been living during most of my lifetime, and it is what I believe we must continue to do. The people in this book have done what Laurier knew they could do—they have become Canadians.