

from
City of Thieves
by
David Benioff

“No recent novel I’ve read travels so quickly and surely between registers, from humor to devastation. . . . Benioff reminds us what a beautifully ambiguous world we live in.”

—The New York Times Book Review

During the Nazis’ brutal siege of Leningrad, Lev Beniov is arrested for looting and thrown into the same cell as a handsome deserter named Kolya. Instead of being executed, Lev and Kolya are given a shot at saving their own lives by complying with an outrageous directive: secure a dozen eggs for a powerful Soviet colonel to use in his daughter’s wedding cake. In a city cut off from all supplies and suffering unbelievable deprivation, Lev and Kolya embark on a hunt through the dire lawlessness of Leningrad and behind enemy lines to find the impossible.

By turns insightful and funny, thrilling and terrifying, City of Thieves is a gripping, cinematic World War II adventure and an intimate coming-of-age story with an utterly contemporary feel for how boys become men.



You have never been so hungry; you have never been so cold. When we slept, if we slept, we dreamed of the feasts we had carelessly eaten seven months earlier—all that buttered bread, the potato dumplings, the sausages—eaten with disregard, swallowing without tasting, leaving great crumbs on our plates, scraps of fat. In June of 1941, before the Germans came, we thought we were poor. But June seemed like paradise by winter.

At night the wind blew so loud and long it startled you when it stopped; the shutter hinges of the burned-out café on the corner would quit creaking for a few ominous seconds, as if a predator neared and the smaller animals hushed in terror. The shutters themselves had been torn down for firewood in November. There was no more scrap wood in Leningrad. Every wood sign, the slats of the park benches, the floorboards of shattered buildings—all gone and burning in someone's stove. The pigeons were missing, too, caught and stewed in melted ice from the Neva. No one minded slaughtering pigeons. It was the dogs and cats that caused trouble. You would hear a rumor in October that someone had roasted the family mutt and split it four ways for supper; we'd laugh and shake our heads, not believing it, and also wondering if dog tasted good with enough salt—there was still plenty of salt, even when everything else ran out we had salt. By January the rumors had become plain fact. No one but the best connected could still feed a pet, so the pets fed us.

There were two theories on the fat versus the thin. Some said

those who were fat before the war stood a better chance of survival: a week without food would not transform a plump man into a skeleton. Others said skinny people were more accustomed to eating little and could better handle the shock of starvation. I stood in the latter camp, purely out of self-interest. I was a runt from birth. Big nosed, black haired, skin scribbled with acne—let's admit I was no girl's idea of a catch. But war made me more attractive. Others dwindled as the ration cards were cut and cut again, halving those who looked like circus strongmen before the invasion. I had no muscle to lose. Like the shrews that kept scavenging while the dinosaurs toppled around them, I was built for deprivation.

On New Year's Eve I sat on the rooftop of the Kirov, the apartment building where I'd lived since I was five (though it had no name until '34, when Kirov was shot and half the city was named after him), watching the fat gray antiaircraft blimps swarm under the clouds, waiting for the bombers. That time of year the sun lingers in the sky for only six hours, scurrying from horizon to horizon as if spooked. Every night four of us would sit on the roof for a three-hour shift, armed with sand pails, iron tongs, and shovels, bundled in all the shirts and sweaters and coats we could find, watching the skies. We were the firefighters. The Germans had decided rushing the city would be too costly, so instead they encircled us, intending to starve us out, bomb us out, burn us out.

Before the war began eleven hundred people lived in the Kirov. By New Year's Eve the number was closer to four hundred. Most of the small children were evacuated before the Germans closed the circle in September. My mother and little sister, Taisya, went to Vyazma to stay with my uncle. The night before they left I fought with my mother, the only fight we'd ever had—or, more precisely, the only time I ever fought back. She wanted me to go with them, of course, far away from the invaders, deep into the heart of the country where the bombers couldn't find us. But I wasn't leaving Piter. I was a man, I would defend my city, I would be a Nevsky for the twentieth century. Perhaps I wasn't quite this ridiculous. I had a real argument: if every able-bodied soul fled, Leningrad would fall

to the Fascists. And without Leningrad, without the City of Workers building tanks and rifles for the Red Army, what chance did Russia have?

My mother thought this was a stupid argument. I was barely seventeen. I didn't weld armor at the Works and I couldn't enlist in the army for close to a year. The defense of Leningrad had nothing to do with me; I was just another mouth to feed. I ignored these insults.

"I'm a firefighter," I told her, because it was true, the city council had ordered the creation of ten thousand firefighting units, and I was the proud commander of the Kirov Fifth-Floor Brigade.

My mother wasn't forty years old, but her hair was already gray. She sat across from me at the kitchen table, holding one of my hands in both of hers. She was a very small woman, barely five feet tall, and I had been afraid of her from birth.

"You are an idiot," she told me. Maybe this sounds insulting, but my mother always called me "her idiot" and by that point I thought of it as an affectionate nickname. "The city was here before you. It will be here after you. Taisya and I need you."

She was right. A better son would have gone with her, a better brother. Taisya adored me, jumped on me when I came home from school, read me the silly little poems she wrote as homework to honor martyrs of the revolution, drew caricatures of my big-nosed profile in her notebook. Generally, I wanted to strangle her. I had no desire to tramp across the country with my mother and kid sister. I was seventeen, flooded with a belief in my own heroic destiny. Molotov's declaration during his radio address on the first day of the war (OUR CAUSE IS JUST! THE ENEMY WILL BE BEATEN! WE SHALL TRIUMPH!) had been printed on thousands of posters and pasted on the city's walls. I believed in the cause; I would not flee the enemy; I would not miss out on the triumph.

Mother and Taisya left the next morning. They rode a bus part of the way, flagged down army trucks for rides, and walked endless miles on country roads in their split-soled boots. It took them three weeks to get there, but they made it, safe at last. She sent me a letter

describing her journey, the terror and fatigue. Maybe she wanted me to feel guilty for abandoning them, and I did, but I also knew it was better with them gone. The great fight was coming and they did not belong on the front. On the seventh of October the Germans took Vyazma and her letters stopped coming.

I'd like to say I missed them when they were gone, and some nights I was lonely, and always I missed my mother's cooking, but I had fantasized about being on my own since I was little. My favorite folktales featured resourceful orphans who make their way through the dark forest, surviving all perils with clever problem solving, outwitting their enemies, finding their fortune in the midst of their wanderings. I wouldn't say I was happy—we were all too hungry to be happy—but I believed that here at last was the Meaning. If Leningrad fell, Russia would fall; if Russia fell, Fascism would conquer the world. All of us believed this. I still believe it.

So I was too young for the army but old enough to dig antitank ditches by day and guard the roofs by night. Manning my crew were my friends from the fifth floor—Vera Osipovna, a talented cellist, and the redheaded Antokolsky twins, whose only known talent was an ability to fart in harmony. In the early days of the war we had smoked cigarettes on the roof, posing as soldiers, brave and strong and square-chinned, scanning the skies for the enemy. By the end of December there were no cigarettes in Leningrad, at least none made with tobacco. A few desperate souls crushed fallen leaves, rolled them in paper, and called them Autumn Lights, claiming the right leaves provided a decent smoke, but in the Kirov, far from the nearest standing tree, this was never an option. We spent our spare minutes hunting rats, who must have thought the disappearance of the city's cats was the answer to all their ancient prayers, until they realized there was nothing left to eat in the garbage.

After months of bombing raids we could identify the various German planes by the pitch of their engines. That night it was the Junkers 88s, as it had been for weeks, replacing the Heinkels and Dorniers that our fighters had gotten good at gunning down. As wretched as our city had become in daylight, after dark there was a

strange beauty in the siege. From the roof of the Kirov, if the moon was out, we could see all of Leningrad: the needlepoint of the Admiralty tower (splashed with gray paint to obscure it from the bombers); the Peter and Paul Fortress (spires draped with camouflage netting); the domes of Saint Isaac's and the Church on Spilled Blood. We could see the crews manning the antiaircraft guns on the rooftops of neighboring buildings. The Baltic Fleet had dropped anchor on the Neva; they floated there, giant gray sentries, firing their big guns at the Nazi artillery emplacements.

Most beautiful were the dogfights. The Ju88s and the Sukhois circled above the city, invisible from below unless they were caught in the eyes of the powerful searchlights. The Sukhois had large red stars painted on the undersides of their wings so our antiaircraft crews wouldn't shoot them down. Every few nights we'd see a battle spotlit as if for the stage, the heavier, slower German bombers banking hard to let their gunners get a bead on the darting Russian fighters. When a Junkers went down, the plane's burning carcass falling like an angel cast from heaven, a great shout of defiance rose up from rooftops all across the city, all the gunners and firefighters shaking their fists to salute the victorious pilot.

We had a little radio on the roof with us. On New Year's Eve we listened to the Spassky chimes in Moscow playing the "*Internationale*." Vera had found half an onion somewhere; she cut it into four pieces on a plate smeared with sunflower oil. When the onion was gone, we mopped up the remaining oil with our ration bread. Ration bread did not taste like bread. It did not taste like food. After the Germans bombed the Badayev grain warehouses, the city bakeries got creative. Everything that could be added to the recipe without poisoning people was added to the recipe. The entire city was starving, no one had enough to eat, and still, everyone cursed the bread, the sawdust flavor, how hard it got in the cold. People broke their teeth trying to chew it. Even today, even when I've forgotten the faces of people I loved, I can still remember the taste of that bread.

Half an onion and a 125-gram loaf of bread split four ways—this

was a decent meal. We lay on our backs, wrapped in blankets, watching the air-raid blimps on their long tethers drifting in the wind, listening to the radio's metronome. When there was no music to play or news to report, the radio station transmitted the sound of a metronome, that endless tick-tick-tick letting us know the city was still unconquered, the Fascists still outside the gate. The broadcast metronome was Piter's beating heart and the Germans never stilled it.

It was Vera who spotted the man falling from the sky. She shouted and pointed and we all stood to get a better look. One of the searchlights shone on a parachutist descending toward the city, his silk canopy a white tulip bulb above him.

"A Fritz," said Oleg Antokolsky, and he was right; we could see the gray Luftwaffe uniform. Where had he come from? None of us had heard the sounds of aerial combat or the report of an AA gun. We hadn't heard a bomber passing overhead for close to an hour.

"Maybe it's started," said Vera. For weeks we'd been hearing rumors that the Germans were preparing a massive paratrooper drop, a final raid to pluck the miserable thorn of Leningrad from their advancing army's backside. At any minute we expected to look up and see thousands of Nazis drifting toward the city, a snow-storm of white parachutes blotting out the sky, but dozens of searchlights slashed through the darkness and found no more enemies. There was only this one, and judging from the limpness of the body suspended from the parachute harness, he was already dead.

We watched him drift down, frozen in the searchlight, low enough that we could see that one of his black boots was missing.

"He's coming our way," I said. The wind blew him toward Voinova Street. The twins looked at each other.

"Luger," said Oleg.

"Luftwaffe don't carry Lugers," said Grisha. He was five minutes older and the authority on Nazi weaponry. "Walther PPK."

Vera smiled at me. "German chocolate."

We ran for the stairway door, abandoning our firefighting tools, racing down the dark stairwell. We were fools, of course. A slip on

one of those concrete steps, with no fat or muscle to cushion the fall, meant a broken bone, and a broken bone meant death. But none of us cared. We were very young and a dead German was falling onto Voinova Street carrying gifts from *das Vaterland*.

We sprinted through the courtyard and climbed over the locked gate. All the streetlamps were dark. The entire city was dark—partly to make the job tougher for the bombers and partly because most of the electricity was diverted to the munitions factories—but the moon was bright enough to see by. Voinova was wide open and deserted, six hours into curfew. No cars in sight. Only the military and government had access to gasoline, and all the civilian autos had been requisitioned during the first months of the war. Strips of paper crossed the shop windows, which the radio told us made them more resistant to shattering. Maybe this was true, though I had walked by many storefronts in Leningrad where nothing remained in the window frame but a dangling strip of paper.

Out on the street we looked into the sky but could not find our man.

“Where’d he go?”

“You think he landed on a roof?”

The searchlights were tracking the sky, but they were all mounted on top of tall buildings and none of them had an angle to shine down Voinova Street. Vera tugged on the collar of my greatcoat, a vast old navy coat inherited from my father and still too big for me, but warmer than anything else I owned.

I turned and saw him gliding down the street, our German, his single black boot skidding over the frozen pavement, the great canopy of his white parachute still swollen in the wind, blowing him toward the gates of the Kirov, his chin slumped against his chest, his dark hair flecked with crystals of ice, his face bloodless in the moonlight. We stood very still and watched him sail closer. We had seen things that winter no eyes should ever see, we thought we were beyond surprise, but we were wrong, and if the German had drawn his Walther and begun shooting, none of us would have been able to get our feet moving in time. But the dead man stayed dead and at last the

wind gave out, the parachute deflated, and he slumped to the pavement, dragged another few meters facedown in final humiliation.

We gathered around the pilot. He was a tall man, well built, and if we had seen him walking around Piter in street clothes, we would have known him at once for an infiltrator—he had the body of a man who ate meat every day.

Grisha knelt and unholstered the German's sidearm. "Walther PPK. Told you."

We rolled the German onto his back. His pale face was scuffed, the skin scraped on the asphalt, the abrasions as colorless as the intact skin. The dead don't bruise. I couldn't tell if he had died frightened or defiant or peaceful. There was no trace of life or personality in his face—he looked like a corpse who had been born a corpse.

Oleg stripped off the black leather gloves while Vera went for the scarf and goggles. I found a sheath strapped to the pilot's ankle and pulled out a beautifully weighted knife with a silver finger guard and a fifteen-centimeter single-edge blade etched with words I could not read in the moonlight. I resheathed the blade and strapped it to my own ankle, feeling for the first time in months that my warrior destiny was at last coming true.

Oleg found the dead man's wallet and grinned as he counted out the deutsche marks. Vera pocketed a chronometer, twice as big as a wristwatch, that the German had worn around the sleeve of his flight jacket. Grisha found a pair of folded binoculars in a leather case, two extra magazines for the Walther, and a slim hip flask. He unscrewed the cap, sniffed, and passed me the flask.

"Cognac?"

I took a sip and nodded. "Cognac."

"When did you ever taste cognac?" asked Vera.

"I've had it before."

"When?"

"Let me see," said Oleg, and the bottle went around the circle, the four of us squatting on our haunches around the fallen pilot, sipping the liquor that might have been cognac or brandy or Arma-

gnac. None of us knew the difference. Whatever it was, the stuff was warmth in the belly.

Vera stared at the German's face. Her expression held no pity, no fear, only curiosity and contempt—the invader had come to drop his bombs on our city and instead had dropped himself. We hadn't shot him down, but we felt triumphant anyway. No one else in the Kirov had come across an enemy's corpse. We would be the talk of the apartment bloc in the morning.

"How do you think he died?" she asked. No bullet wounds blemished the body, no singed hair or leather, no sign of any violence at all. His skin was far too white for the living, but nothing had pierced it.

"He froze to death," I told them. I said it with authority because I knew it was true and I had no way to prove it. The pilot had bailed out thousands of meters above nighttime Leningrad. The air at ground level was too cold for the clothes he was wearing—up in the clouds, outside of his warm cockpit, he never had a chance.

Grisha raised the flask in salute. "Here's to the cold."

The flask began to circle again. It never got to me. We should have heard the car's engine from two blocks away, the city after curfew was quiet as the moon, but we were busy drinking our German liquor, making our toasts. Only when the GAZ turned onto Voinova Street, heavy tires rattling on the asphalt, headlights stabbing toward us, did we realize the danger. The punishment for violating curfew without a permit was summary execution. The punishment for abandoning a firefighting detail was summary execution. The punishment for looting was summary execution. The courts no longer operated; the police officers were on the front lines, the prisons half full and dwindling fast. Who had food for an enemy of the state? If you broke the law and you were caught, you were dead. There wasn't time for any legal niceties.

So we ran. We knew the Kirov better than anyone. Once we got inside the courtyard gates and into the chilled darkness of the sprawling building, no one could find us if they had three months to search. We could hear the soldiers shouting at us to stop, but that

didn't matter; voices didn't frighten us, only bullets made a difference and no one had pulled a trigger yet. Grisha made it to the gate first—he was the closest thing to an athlete among us—he leaped onto the iron bars and hoisted himself upward. Oleg was right behind him and I was behind Oleg. Our bodies were weak, muscles shrunken from lack of protein, but fear helped us scale the gate as quickly as we ever had.

Near the top of the gate I looked back and saw that Vera had slipped on a patch of ice. She stared up at me, her eyes round and fearful, on her hands and knees as the GAZ braked beside the body of the German pilot and four soldiers stepped out. They were ten meters away, their rifles in their hands, but I still had time to pull myself over the gate and disappear into the Kirov.

I wish I could tell you that the thought of deserting Vera never entered my mind, that my friend was in danger and I went to her rescue without hesitation. Truly, though, at that moment I hated her. I hated her for being clumsy at the worst possible time, for staring up at me with her panicked brown eyes, electing me to be her savior even though Grisha was the only one she had ever kissed. I knew that I could not live with the memory of those eyes pleading for me, and she knew it, too, and I hated her even as I jumped down from the gate, lifted her to her feet, and hauled her to the iron bars. I was weak, but Vera couldn't have weighed forty kilos. I boosted her onto the gate as the soldiers shouted and their boot heels slapped on the pavement and the bolts of their rifles snapped into place.

Vera went over the top and I scrambled up behind her, ignoring the soldiers. If I stopped, they would gather around me, tell me I was an enemy of the state, force me to kneel, and shoot me in the back of the head. I was an easy target now, but maybe they were drunk, maybe they were city boys like me who had never fired a shot before in their lives; maybe they would miss on purpose because they knew I was a patriot and a defender of the city and I had snuck out of the Kirov only because a German had fallen five thousand meters onto my street, and what seventeen-year-old Russian boy would not sneak outside to peek at a dead Fascist?

My chin was level with the top of the gate when I felt the gloved hands wrap around my ankles. Strong hands, the hands of army men who ate two meals every day. I saw Vera run inside the Kirov, never looking back. I tried to cling to the iron bars, but the soldiers dragged me down, tossed me to the sidewalk, and stood above me, the muzzles of their Tokarevs jabbing at my cheeks. None of the soldiers looked older than nineteen and none seemed reluctant to splatter the street with my brains.

“Looks ready to shit himself, this one.”

“You having a party here, son? Found yourself some schnapps?”

“He’s a good one for the colonel. He can ride with the Fritz.”

Two of them bent down, grabbed me under the armpits, yanked me to my feet, guided me to the still-idling GAZ, and shoved me into the backseat. The other two soldiers lifted the German by his hands and boots and swung him into the car beside me.

“Keep him warm,” one of them said, and they all laughed as if it were the funniest joke ever told. They squeezed into the car and slammed the doors.

I decided I was still alive because they wanted to execute me in public, as a warning to other looters. A few minutes before, I had felt far more powerful than the dead pilot. Now, as we sped down the dark street, swerving to avoid bomb craters and sprays of rubble, he seemed to be smirking at me, his white lips a scar splitting his frozen face. We were going the same way.

2

If you grew up in Piter, you grew up fearing the Crosses, that gloomy redbrick stain on the Neva, a brutish, brooding warehouse of the lost. Six thousand convicts lived there in peacetime. I doubt a thousand were left by January. Hundreds imprisoned for petty crimes were released into Red Army units, released into the meat grinder of the German Blitzkrieg. Hundreds more starved in their cells. Each day the guards dragged the skin-draped skeletons out of the Crosses and onto sledges where the dead were stacked eight high.

When I was small, it was the silence of the prison that frightened me most. You walked by expecting to hear the shouts of rough men or the clamor of a brawl, but no noise escaped the thick walls, as if the prisoners inside—most of them awaiting trial or a trip to the gulag or a bullet in the head—hacked out their own tongues to protest their fate. The place was an antiprison, designed to keep the enemies inside, and every boy in Leningrad had heard the phrase a hundred times: “You keep on with that and you’ll end up in the Crosses.”

I had seen my cell only for a second when the guards shoved me inside, their lamps shining on the rough stone walls, a cell two meters wide and four meters long, with bunk beds for four and all of them empty. I was relieved at that, I didn’t want to share the darkness with a stranger with tattooed knuckles, but after a time—

minutes? hours?—the black silence began to feel tangible, something that could get into your lungs and drown you.

Darkness and solitude generally didn't frighten me. Electricity was as rare as bacon in Piter those days, and my apartment in the Kirov was empty now that Mother and Taisya had fled. The long nights were dark and quiet, but there was always noise somewhere. Mortars fired from the Germans lines; an army truck motoring down the boulevard; the dying old woman upstairs moaning in her bed. Awful sounds, really, but *sounds*—something to let you know you were still in this world. That cell in the Crosses was the only truly silent place I'd ever entered. I could hear nothing at all; I could see nothing. They had locked me in death's waiting room.

As siege-hardened as I believed I was before my arrest, the truth was that I had no more courage in January than I had in June—contrary to popular belief, the experience of terror does not make you braver. Perhaps, though, it is easier to hide your fear when you're afraid all the time.

I tried to think of a song to sing, a poem to recite, but all the words were stuck inside my head like salt in a caked shaker. I lay on one of the top bunks, hoping whatever heat existed within the Crosses would rise and find me. Morning promised nothing but a bullet in the brain and yet I longed for daylight to seep inside. When they dumped me in the cell, I thought I had seen a sliver of barred window near the ceiling, but now I couldn't remember. I tried counting to a thousand to pass some time but always got lost around four hundred, hearing phantom rats that turned out to be my own fingers scratching the torn mattress.

The night was never going to end. The Germans had shot down the fucking sun, they could do it, why not, their scientists were the best in the world, they could figure it out. They had learned how to stop time. I was blind and deaf. Only the cold and my thirst reminded me that I was alive. You get so lonely you start longing for the sentries, just to hear their footsteps, smell the vodka on their breath.

So many great Russians endured long stretches in prison. That night I learned I would never be a great Russian. A few hours alone in a cell, suffering no torture other than the darkness and the silence and the absolute cold, a few hours of that and I was already half broken. The fierce souls who survived winter after winter in Siberia possessed something I did not, great faith in some splendid destiny, whether God's kingdom or justice or the distant promise of revenge. Or maybe they were so beaten down they became nothing more than animals on their hind legs, working at their masters' command, eating whatever slop he threw down for them, sleeping when ordered and dreaming of nothing but the end.

At last there was noise, footsteps, several sets of heavy boots clomping in the corridor. A key turned in the lock. I sat up in bed and cracked my skull against the ceiling, hard enough that I bit through my lip.

Two guards—one of them holding an oil lamp, the prettiest light I ever saw, better than any sunrise—escorted a new prisoner, a young, uniformed soldier who glanced around the cell like a man viewing an apartment he's considering for rent. The soldier was tall and stood very straight; he towered over the guards, and though they had pistols in their holsters and the soldier was unarmed, he seemed ready to give orders. He held his Astrakhan fur hat in one hand and his leather gloves in the other.

He looked at me just as the guards left, shutting the cell door and bolting it from the outside, taking their light with them. His face was the last thing I saw before the darkness resumed, so it stuck in my mind: the high Cossack cheekbones, the amused twist of the lips, the hay-blond hair, the eyes blue enough to please any Aryan bride.

I sat on the bed and he stood on the stone floor and from the perfect silence I knew neither of us had shifted position—we were still staring at each other in the darkness.

"Are you a Jew?" he asked.

"What?"

"A Jew. You look like a Jew."

"You look like a Nazi."

"I know. *Ich spreche ein bisschen Deutsch*, too. I volunteered to be a spy, but nobody listened to me. So, you are a Jew?"

"Why do you care?"

"Don't be ashamed of it. I don't have a problem with Jews. Emanuel Lasker is my second-favorite chess player. Just a rung under Capablanca. . . . Capablanca is Mozart, pure genius; you can't love chess and not love Capablanca. But Lasker, nobody's better in the endgame. You have any food?"

"No."

"Put out your hand."

This seemed like some sort of trap, a game children played to snare morons. He would slap my palm or just let it hang there till I realized my stupidity. But no offer of food could be refused, even the least likely, so I stretched my hand into the darkness and waited. A moment later a sliver of something cold and greasy sat on my palm. I don't know how he found my hand, but he did, without any fumbling.

"Sausage," he said. And then, after a pause, "Don't worry. It's not pork."

"I eat pork." I sniffed at the sausage and then nibbled off a bit. It was as far from real meat as ration bread from real bread, but there was fat in it, and fat was life. I chewed on the sliver as slowly as I could, trying to make it last.

"You chew loudly," he told me, a reprimand from the dark. I heard the creak of bedsprings as he sat on one of the lower bunk beds. "And you're supposed to say thank you."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. What's your name?"

"Lev."

"Lev what?"

"What do you care?"

"It's just manners," he said. "For instance, if I introduce myself, I say, 'Good evening, my name is Nikolai Alexandrovich Vlasov, my friends call me Kolya.'"

"You just want to know if I have a Jewish name."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Ah." He sighed happily, pleased to hear his instincts confirmed.

"Thank you. Don't know why you're so afraid of telling people."

I didn't answer. If he didn't know why, there was no point explaining it.

"So why are you here?" he asked.

"They caught me looting a dead German on Voinova Street."

This alarmed him. "The Germans are already on Voinova? So it's begun?"

"Nothing's begun. He was a bomber pilot. He ejected."

"The AA boys got him?"

"The cold got him. Why are you here?"

"Sheer idiocy. They think I'm a deserter."

"So why didn't they shoot you?"

"Why didn't they shoot *you*?"

"Don't know," I admitted. "They said I was a good one for the colonel."

"I'm not a deserter. I'm a student. I was defending my thesis."

"Really? Your thesis?" It sounded like the dumbest excuse in the history of desertion.

"An interpretation of Ushakovo's *The Courtyard Hound*, through the lens of contemporary sociological analysis." He waited for me to say something, but I had nothing to say to that. "You know the book?"

"No. Ushakovo?"

"Miserable how bad the schools have gotten. They should have you memorizing passages." He sounded like a crotchety old professor, though from my one look at him I would have guessed he was twenty. "'In the slaughterhouse where we first kissed, the air still stank from the blood of the lambs.' First line. Some say it's the greatest Russian novel. And you've never heard of it."

He sighed extravagantly. A moment later I heard a strange

scratching sound, as if a rat were sharpening its claws on the mattress ticking.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Hm?"

"You don't hear that noise?"

"I'm writing in my journal."

I could see no farther with my eyes open than with them closed and this one was writing in his journal. Now I could tell the scratching was a pencil on paper. After a few minutes the journal slapped closed and I heard him stuff the book into his pocket.

"I can write in the dark," he said, punctuating the sentence with a light burp. "One of my talents."

"Notes on *The Courtyard Hound*?"

"Exactly. How's this for strange? Chapter six: Radchenko spends a month in the Crosses because his former best friend . . . Well, I don't want to give it away. But I have to say, it seemed like fate when they brought me here. I've been every other place Radchenko visited—every restaurant and theater and graveyard, the ones that are still around, anyway—but I've never been inside here. A critic could argue that until you spend a night in the Crosses, you can't understand Radchenko."

"Pretty lucky for you."

"Mm."

"So you think they'll shoot us in the morning?"

"I doubt it. They're not preserving us for the night just to shoot us tomorrow." He sounded quite jaunty about it, as if we were discussing a sporting event, as if the outcome wasn't particularly momentous no matter which way it went.

"I haven't had a shit in eight days," he confided. "I'm not saying a good shit—it's been months since I've had a good shit—I mean no shit at all for eight days."

We were quiet for a moment, considering these words.

"How long do you think a man can last without shitting?"

It was an interesting question and I was curious to know the

answer myself, but I didn't have one for him. I heard him lie down, heard him yawn happily, relaxed and content, his piss-stained straw mattress as comfortable as a feather bed. The silence lingered for a minute and I thought my cell mate had fallen asleep.

"These walls must be a meter thick," he said at last. "This is probably the safest place in Piter to spend a night." And then he did fall asleep, shifting from speech into snores so quickly that at first I thought he was faking.

I've always envied people who sleep easily. Their brains must be cleaner, the floorboards of the skull well swept, all the little monsters closed up in a steamer trunk at the foot of the bed. I was born an insomniac and that's the way I'll die, wasting thousands of hours along the way longing for unconsciousness, longing for a rubber mallet to crack me in the head, not so hard, not hard enough to do any damage, just a good whack to put me down for the night. But that night I didn't have a chance. I stared into the blackness until the blackness blurred into gray, until the ceiling above me began to take form and the light from the east dribbled in through the narrow barred window that existed after all. Only then did I realize that I still had a German knife strapped to my calf.

An hour after dawn two new guards opened the cell door, roused us from bed, and clamped handcuffs on our wrists. They ignored my questions but seemed amused when Kolya asked for a cup of tea and an omelet. Jokes must have been rare in the Crosses, because it wasn't such a good joke, but the guards grinned as they shoved us down the hallway. Somewhere someone was moaning, a low and endless moan, a ship's horn heard from a great distance.

I didn't know if we were heading for the gallows or an interrogation chamber. The night had passed without sleep; save for a swig from the German's flask, there hadn't been a sip to drink since the rooftop of the Kirov; a lump the size of an infant's fist had swelled where my forehead had cracked the ceiling—it was a bad morning, really; among my worst—but I wanted to live. I wanted to live and I knew I could not face my execution with grace. I would kneel before the hangman or the firing squad and plead my youth, detail my many hours served on the rooftop waiting for the bombs, all the barricades I had helped to build, the ditches I had dug. All of us had done it, we were all serving the cause, but I was one of Piter's true sons and I didn't deserve to die. What harm had been done? We drank a dead German's cognac—for this you want to end me? You want to tie rough hemp around my skinny neck and shut down my brain forever because I stole a knife? Don't do this, comrade. I don't think there is greatness in me, but there is something better than this.

The guards led us down a stone staircase, the steps beaten smooth by hundreds of thousands of boot heels. An old man with a heavy gray scarf wrapped twice around his throat sat on the far side of the iron bars that blocked the bottom of the staircase. He gave us a gummy grin and unlocked the gate. A moment later we walked through a heavy wooden door into the sunlight, emerging from the Crosses intact and alive.

Kolya, unimpressed by our apparent reprieve, scooped up a palmful of clean snow with his shackled hands and licked it. The boldness of the maneuver made me jealous, as did the thought of cold water on my tongue. But I didn't want to do anything to anger the guards. Our escape from the Crosses seemed like an odd mistake and I expected to be shoved inside again if I did something wrong.

The guards escorted us to a waiting GAZ, its big engine grumbling, exhaust pipes spewing dirty vapor, two soldiers sitting in the front seat watching us with zero curiosity, their fur-lined hats pulled down low on their foreheads.

Kolya hopped into the backseat without waiting for an order.

"Gentlemen, to the opera!"

The guards, standards diminished by years of working the Crosses, gave Kolya another good laugh. The soldiers did not. One of them turned and inspected Kolya.

"You say another word and I'll break your fucking arm. It were up to me, you'd already have a bullet in your head. Fucking deserter. You"—and this was addressed to me—"get in."

Kolya's mouth was already open and I knew violence was on the way; the soldier did not look like a bluffer and Kolya, clearly, was incapable of heeding a simple threat.

"I'm not a deserter," he said. With his manacled hands he managed to push up the left sleeve of his greatcoat, the left sleeve of his army sweater, the left sleeves of the two shirts beneath it, and offered his forearm to the soldier in the front seat. "You want to break the arm, break it, but I'm not a deserter."

For a long count nobody spoke—Kolya stared at the soldier, the

soldier stared back, and the rest of us watched and waited, impressed by this match of wills and curious to see who would win. Finally, the soldier conceded defeat by turning away from Kolya and barking at me.

“Get in the car, you little cunt.”

The guards grinned. This was their morning’s entertainment. They had no torture scheduled, no teeth to wrench, no nails to pluck from a screaming man’s nail beds, so they got their fun watching me, the little cunt, scurry into the backseat next to Kolya.

The soldier drove very fast, caring not at all about the slicks of ice on the road. We sped along the banks of the frozen Neva. I had my collar upturned so I could hide my face from the wind that blasted in beneath the canvas roof. Kolya didn’t seem bothered by the cold. He stared at the spire of the Church of John the Baptist across the river and said nothing.

We turned onto the Kamennostrovsky Bridge, the old steel of its arches rimed with frost, the lampposts bearded with icicles. Onto Kamenny Island, slowing only a bit to circle around a bomb crater that had shattered the center of the road, pulling into a long driveway lined with the stumps of lime trees, and parking in front of a magnificent wooden mansion with a white-columned portico. Kolya studied the house.

“The Dolgorukovs lived here,” he said, as we stepped out of the car. “I suppose none of you have heard of the Dolgorukovs.”

“A bunch of aristocrats who got their necks snapped,” said one of the soldiers, gesturing with the barrel of his rifle for us to walk toward the front door.

“Some of them,” admitted Kolya. “And some of them slept with emperors.”

In the daylight Kolya looked like he could have stepped out of one of the propaganda posters pasted on walls throughout the city; the angles of his face were heroic—the strong chin, the straight nose, the blond hair that fell across his forehead. He was a fine-looking deserter.

The soldiers escorted us onto the porch, where sandbags had

been piled high to form a machine-gun nest. Two soldiers sat near their gun, passing a cigarette between them. Kolya sniffed the air and stared longingly at the hand-rolled butt.

"Real tobacco," he said, before our armed guides pushed open the front door and herded us inside.

I had never been inside a mansion before, had only read about them in the novels: the dances on the parquet floors, the servants ladling soup from silver tureens, the stern patriarch in his book-lined study warning his weeping daughter to stay away from the lowborn boy. But while the old Dolgorukov home still looked magnificent on the outside, the revolution had come to the interior. The marble floor was tracked with a thousand muddy boot prints, unwashed for months. The smoke-stained wallpaper curled away from the baseboards. None of the original furniture had survived, none of the oil paintings and Chinese vases that must have lined the walls and rested on teak shelves.

Dozens of uniformed officers hurried from one room to the next, hustled up a curving double staircase missing its balustrade and all the balusters, probably torn down for firewood weeks ago. The uniforms were not Red Army. Kolya noticed me staring.

"NKVD. Maybe they think we're spies."

I didn't need Kolya to tell me the men were NKVD. Since I was little I had known what their uniforms looked like, with their peaked blue-and-maroon caps and their holstered Tokarevs. I had learned to dread the sight of their Packards idling outside the gates of the Kirov, the Black Ravens, waiting to carry some unlucky citizen away from his home. The NKVD arrested at least fifteen men from the building while I lived there. Sometimes those taken returned after a few weeks, their heads shaved and their faces pale and lifeless, avoiding my eyes in the stairwell as they limped up to their apartments. The broken men who came home must have known how rare and lucky they were, but they took no apparent joy in their survival. They knew what happened to my father and they could not meet my eyes.

The soldiers kept prodding us forward till we entered a sun-

room at the very rear of the house, the tall French windows offering a fine vantage of the Neva and the grim, stolid apartment buildings of the Vyborg section on the far side of the river. An older man sat alone at a simple wood desk set down in the middle of the sunroom. He had a telephone receiver nestled between his face and his shoulder so he could scribble with a pen on a pad of paper as he listened.

He glanced at us as we waited at the entryway. He looked like an ex-boxer with his thick neck and crooked, flattened nose. The shadows below his hooded eyes were deep, as were the furrows that crossed his forehead. His gray hair was shaved very close to the scalp. He might have been fifty years old, but he looked like he could rise from his chair and beat us all down without mussing his uniform. Three metal stars shone on the collar tabs of his jacket. I didn't know precisely what three stars signified, but they were three stars more than anyone else in the mansion.

He tossed his pad of paper on the desk and I could see that he hadn't been taking notes, as I'd thought, but simply drawing X's, over and over again, till the entire sheet of paper was covered with them. For some reason this frightened me more than his uniform or his brawler's face. A man who drew pictures of tits or dogs seemed like a man I could understand. But a man who drew nothing but X's?

He was watching us, Kolya and me, and I knew that he was judging us, condemning us for our crimes and sentencing us to death, all while listening to a voice traveling across wires.

"Good," he said at last, "I want it done by noon. No exceptions."

He hung up the phone and smiled at us, and the smile was as incongruous on his face as the man and his plain wood desk were in the gorgeous sunroom of the old noble house. The colonel (for I assumed now that this was the colonel the soldiers had spoken of the night before) had a beautiful smile, his teeth surprisingly white, his brutal face shifting instantly from menace to welcome.

"The deserter and the looter! Come, come closer, we don't need the cuffs. I don't think these boys will cause any trouble." He

gestured to the soldiers, who reluctantly pulled out their keys and removed our manacles.

"I'm not a deserter," said Kolya.

"No? Go," he ordered the soldiers, not bothering to look at them. The soldiers obeyed, leaving us alone with the colonel. He stood and walked toward us, the pistol on his waist holster slapping against his hip. Kolya stood very straight, at attention for the officer's inspection, and I, not knowing what to do, followed his lead. The colonel kept coming until his battered face nearly touched Kolya's.

"You're not a deserter and yet your unit reported you missing and you were picked up forty kilometers from where you were supposed to be."

"Well, there's a simple explanation—"

"And you," he continued, turning to me. "A German paratrooper falls on your block and you don't notify the authorities. You decide to enrich yourself at the city's expense. Is there a simple explanation for that, too?"

I needed water. My mouth was so dry it felt scaly, like the skin of a lizard, and I had begun to see bright little sparks of light swimming in the peripheries of my vision.

"Well?"

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You're sorry?" He looked at me a moment longer and laughed. "Ah, well, you're sorry, all right then, that's fine. As long as you're sorry, that's the important thing. Listen, boy, do you know how many people I've executed? I don't mean on my orders, I mean done it myself, with this Tokarev—" Here he slapped the holstered pistol. "Do you want to guess? No? Good, because I don't know. I've lost count. And I'm the kind of man who likes to know. I keep track of things. I know exactly how many women I've fucked, and it's quite a few, believe me. You're a handsome boy," he said to Kolya, "but trust me, you won't catch up with me, even if you live to a hundred, and that seems doubtful."

I glanced at Kolya, expecting him to say something stupid and get us both killed, but Kolya, for once, had nothing to say.

"Sorry is what you say to the schoolmaster when you break a piece of chalk," the colonel continued. "Sorry doesn't work for looters and deserters."

"We thought he might have a little food on him."

The colonel stared at me for a long moment.

"Did he?"

"Just some cognac. Or brandy . . . schnapps, maybe."

"We shoot a dozen people every day for forging ration cards. You know what they tell us, before we put bullets in their brains? They were hungry. Of course they were hungry! Everyone is hungry. That won't stop us from shooting thieves."

"I wasn't stealing from Russians—"

"You stole state property. Did you take anything from the body?"

I hesitated as long as I dared.

"A knife."

"Ah. The honest thief."

I knelt, unstrapped the sheath from my ankle, and handed it to the colonel. He stared at the German leather.

"You had this on you all night? No one searched you?" He exhaled with a soft curse, weary of the incompetence. "No wonder we're losing the war." He pulled out the blade and studied the inscription. "BLOOD AND HONOR. Ha. May God fuck those whoresons in the ass. You know how to use it?"

"What?"

"The knife. Slashing," he said, slashing the air with the steel blade, "is better than stabbing. Harder to block. Go for the throat, and if that's not working, go for the eyes or the belly. Thigh's good, too, big veins in the thighs." All this instruction was accompanied by vigorous demonstration. "And never stop," he said, dancing closer, the steel flashing, "never let up; keep the knife moving, keep him on the defensive."

He sheathed the blade and tossed it to me.

"Keep it. You'll need it."

I stared at Kolya, who shrugged. All of this was too strange to understand so there was no point straining the mind, trying to sort out where we stood. I got back on one knee and strapped the knife to my ankle again.

The colonel had moved to the French windows, where he watched yesterday's snow blowing across the frozen Neva.

"Your father was the poet."

"Yes," I admitted, standing straight and staring at the back of the colonel's head. No one outside my family had mentioned my father in four years. I mean this literally. Not a word.

"He could write. What happened was . . . unfortunate."

What could I say to that? I stared at my boots and knew that Kolya was squinting at me, trying to figure out which unfortunate poet sired me.

"Neither of you has eaten today," said the colonel, not asking a question. "Black tea and toast, how does that sound? Maybe we can find some fish soup somewhere. Borya!"

An aide stepped into the sunroom, a pencil tucked behind his ear.

"Get these boys some breakfast."

Borya nodded and disappeared as quickly as he'd appeared.

Fish soup. I hadn't had fish soup since summer. The idea of it was wild and exotic, like a naked girl on a Pacific island.

"Come over here," said the colonel. He opened one of the French doors and stepped into the cold. Kolya and I followed him along a gravel path that led through a frost-blasted garden, down to the banks of the river.

A girl in a fox fur coat skated on the Neva. In a normal winter you'd see hundreds of girls skating on a weekend afternoon, but this wasn't a normal winter. The ice was solid and had been for weeks, but who had the strength for figure eights? Standing on the frozen mud at the river's edge, Kolya and I stared at her the way you'd stare at a monkey riding a unicycle down the street. She was

freakishly lovely, her dark hair parted in the middle and tied up in a loose bun, her wind-whipped cheeks flushed and full and healthy. It took me a few seconds to realize why she looked so strange, and then it was obvious—even at a distance you could tell that the girl was well fed. There was nothing pinched and desperate about her face. She had an athlete’s casual grace; her pirouettes were tight and fast; she never got winded. Her thighs must have been magnificent—long, pale, and strong—and I could feel my prick hardening for the first time in days.

“She’s getting married next Friday,” said the colonel. “A piece of meat she’s marrying, I say, but all right. He’s a Party man, he can afford her.”

“That’s your daughter?” asked Kolya.

The colonel grinned, his white teeth splitting his brawler’s face.

“You don’t think she looks like me? No, no, she got lucky there. She got her mother’s face and her father’s temper—this one will conquer the world.”

Only then did I realize that the colonel’s teeth were false, a bridge that seemed to encompass the entire upper row. And I knew, suddenly but surely, that the man had been tortured. They had brought him in during one purge or another, called him a Trotskyite or a White or a Fascist sympathizer, pried the teeth from his mouth, and beaten him till his eyes bled, till he pissed blood and shat blood, till the order came from whatever Moscow office: we have rehabilitated the man, let him alone now, he is one of us again.

I could picture it because I had pictured it often, whenever I wondered about my father’s last days. He had the misfortune of being a Jew and a poet and mildly famous, friends once with Mayakovsky and Mandelstam, bitter enemies with Obranovich and the others he considered tongues of the bureaucracy, the slingers of revolutionary verse who labeled my father an agitator and a parasite because he wrote about the Leningrad underworld, though—officially—there was no Leningrad underworld. More than this, he had the temerity to title his book *Piter*, the city’s nickname, the name every native used, but banned from all Soviet text because “Saint

Petersburg” was a czar’s arrogance, named for the old tyrant’s patron saint.

One summer afternoon in 1937 they took my father from the offices of the literary magazine where he worked. They never gave him back. The call from the Moscow office never came for him; rehabilitation was not an option. An intelligence officer might hold future value for the state, but a decadent poet did not. He might have died in the Crosses or in Siberia or somewhere in between, we never learned. If he was buried, there is no marker; if he was burned, there is no urn.

For a long time I was angry with my father for writing such dangerous words; it seemed stupid that a book was more important than sticking around and slapping the back of my head when I picked my nose. But later I decided he hadn’t chosen to insult the Party, not consciously, not the way Mandelstam had (Mandelstam with his crazy bravery, writing that Stalin had fat fingers like slugs, a mustache like two cockroaches). My father didn’t know that *Piter* was dangerous until the official reviews were written. He thought he was writing a book five hundred people would read, and maybe he was right, but at least one of those five hundred denounced him and that was that.

The colonel had survived, though, and looking at him I wondered if he found it strange that he had been so close to the shark’s jaws and somehow fought his way back to shore, that he who had waited for another’s mercy could now decide for himself whether to grant it. He didn’t seem troubled at the moment; he watched his daughter skate, he clapped his busted-knuckled hands as she spun.

“So, the wedding is Friday. Even now, even in the middle of all of this—” said the colonel, gesturing with his hands to indicate Leningrad, the famine, the war, “—she wants a real wedding, a *proper* wedding. This is good, life must continue, we’re fighting barbarians but we must remain human, *Russian*. So we will have music, dancing . . . a cake.”

He looked at us each in turn as if there were something momentous about the word *cake* and he needed us both to understand.

"This is the tradition, says my wife, we need a cake. It is terrible luck, a wedding with no cake. Now, I've been fighting all my life against these peasant superstitions, the priests used them to keep people stupid and afraid, but my wife . . . she wants the cake. Fine, fine, make the cake. For months she's been hoarding her sugar, her honey, flour, all the rest."

I thought about this, the sacks of sugar, the jars of honey, the flour that must have been real flour, not moldy salvage from a torpedoed barge. Half the Kirov could probably survive two weeks on her batter alone.

"She has everything she needs, all except the eggs." Again the portentous look. "Eggs," said the colonel, "are hard to find."

For several seconds we all stood silently, watching the colonel's daughter twirl.

"The fleet might have some," said Kolya.

"No. They don't."

"They have tinned beef. I traded a pack of playing cards for some tinned beef from one of the sailors—"

"They don't have eggs."

I don't think I'm stupid, but it was taking me a very long time to understand what the colonel was asking, and a longer time to fire up my courage to ask him.

"You want us to find eggs?"

"A dozen," he said. "She only needs ten, but I figure, one might break, a couple might be rotten." He saw our confusion and he smiled his wonderful smile, gripping our shoulders hard enough to make me stand straighter. "My men say there are no eggs in Leningrad, but I believe there is everything in Leningrad, even now, and I just need the right fellows to find it. A pair of thieves."

"We're not thieves," said Kolya, very righteous, staring into the colonel's eyes. I wanted to punch him. By all rights we should have been dead and frozen, piled onto a sledge with the rest of the day's

corpses. We had our reprieve. Our lives had been returned in exchange for a simple task. A strange task, perhaps, but simple enough. And now he was going to ruin it—he was asking for his bullet, which was bad, but he was asking for my bullet, too, which was far worse.

“You’re not thieves? You abandoned your unit—no, no, shut up, don’t say anything. You abandoned your unit and the moment you did that you forfeited your rights as a soldier in the Red Army—your right to carry your rifle, to wear that coat, those boots. You’re a thief. And you, Big Nose, you looted a corpse. It was a German corpse so it doesn’t personally offend me, but looting is theft. Let’s not play games. You’re both thieves. Bad thieves, that’s true, incompetent thieves, absolutely, but you’re in luck. The good thieves haven’t been caught.”

He turned and walked back toward the house. Kolya and I lingered, watching the colonel’s daughter, her fox fur flashing in the sun. She must have seen us by now, but she never acknowledged us, never glanced our way. We were two of her father’s lackeys and therefore entirely boring. We watched her as long as we could, trying to etch the image into our brains for future masturbation, until the colonel barked at us and we hurried after him.

“You have your ration cards?” he asked, taking long strides, his respite finished, ready again for the long day’s work. “Hand them over.”

I kept mine pinned to the inside pocket of my coat. I unpinned it and saw Kolya pull his from his folded sock. The colonel took them from us.

“You bring me the eggs by sunrise Thursday, you get them back. You don’t, well, you’ve got all of January to eat snow, and there won’t be any cards waiting for you in February, either. That’s assuming one of my men doesn’t find you and kill you before then, and my men are very good at that.”

“They just can’t find eggs,” said Kolya.

The colonel smiled. “I like you, boy. You won’t live a long life, but I like you.”

We stepped inside the sunroom. The colonel sat down at his desk and stared at the black telephone. He raised his eyebrows, remembering something, opened the desk drawer, and pulled out a folded letter. He held it out for Kolya.

"That's a curfew waiver for the two of you. Anyone gives you trouble, show them that, you'll be on your way. And here, this, too. . . ."

He pulled four 100-ruble notes from his wallet and gave them to Kolya, who glanced at the letter and the rubles and slipped them into his pocket.

"That would have bought me a thousand eggs in June," said the colonel.

"And it will again next June," said Kolya. "Fritz won't last the winter."

"With soldiers like you," said the colonel, "we'll be paying for eggs with deutsche marks soon."

Kolya opened his mouth to defend himself, but the colonel shook his head.

"You understand this is a gift? You bring me a dozen eggs by Thursday, I give you your lives back. You understand the rareness of this gift?"

"What day is today?"

"Today is Saturday. You deserted your unit on a Friday. When the sun rises tomorrow it is Sunday. Can you keep track from this point forward? Yes? Good."

Borya returned with four slices of toast on a blue plate. The toast had been slathered with something oily, lard maybe, glistening and fatty and luscious. Another aide stepped into the sunroom behind him, carrying two cups of steaming tea. I waited for a third aide carrying bowls of fish soup, but he never came.

"Eat quick, boys," said the colonel. "You've got a lot of walking to do."