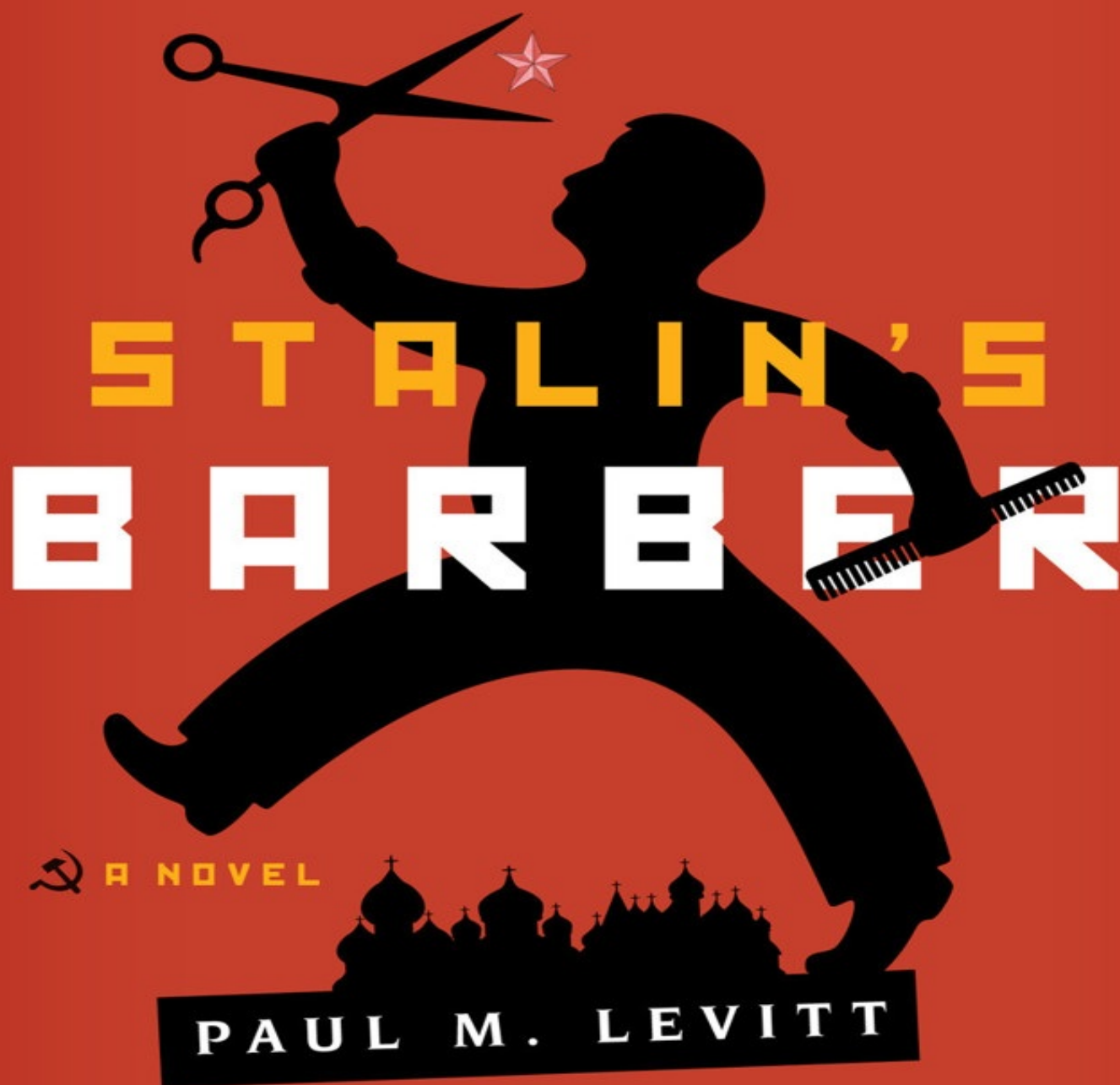


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This is 'grand' writing. . . ."—FRANK DELANEY,  
author of *Ireland: A Novel*, a *New York Times* bestseller



# STALIN'S BARBER

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# STALIN'S BARBER

A NOVEL

PAUL M. LEVITT

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*in homage to Osip Mandelstam*

In Warsaw near the Tomb  
of the Unknown Soldier,  
in a treeless square,  
there used to scowl a statue  
of Feliks Dzierżyński,  
founder of the CheKa,  
the Bolshevik Secret Police.  
His nickname was “Bloody Felek.”

Before the unveiling,  
someone managed to paint  
the statue’s hands blood-red.  
When the string was pulled,  
the dignitaries gasped:  
the blood of his victims  
seemed to drip  
from Bloody Felek’s hands.

The speaker on the podium  
began to stammer.  
The military band  
struck up, then stopped;  
feebly began again.  
To the stuttering tuba,  
the string was pulled back.

Fifty years later, ten thousand  
people jammed the square  
to watch the demolition  
of a monument to a mass murderer.

\*

My cousin Ewa tells the tale  
of yet another fallen icon:  
a giant statue of Stalin,  
the largest in the world.

Taller than the Statue of Liberty,  
the dictator stained the sky  
at the joining of two great rivers:  
the Volga and the Don—  
his “sneer of cold command”  
staring down the starving

Ukraine. The ten-story  
pedestal still stands.

---

Stalin was toppled into the water—  
shallow enough, they say,  
that from the cruise boats one can see  
his colossal face.

Ewa was on one of those boats:  
“From where I stood,  
I only caught a glimpse  
of Stalin’s mustache.”

She giggles. She must have told  
this story countless times.  
We sit around the table smiling,  
sipping home-made hawthorn wine.

Stalin’s mustache.  
The empty  
pedestal still stands.

—Ioanna Warwick

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\* \* \*

Although it has become a cliché to observe that all art is collaboration and that we stand on the shoulders of giants, I cannot leave until I acknowledge to which authors and works, in particular, I am

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After sprinkling alcohol on the British sergeant's left ear to singe the unsightly sprouting hairs, the barber Avraham Bahar ignited the liquid just as two men in long overcoats and black fedoras burst into the shop, pulled out machine pistols, fired, and fled, but not before one of them shouted, "Death to foreigners!"

From the force of the shots, the barber's chair slowly turned, though the sergeant remained motionless. As the red spot on the barbering cape rapidly blossomed into blood, Avraham removed his eyes and grew faint. A gaping hole exposed the man's slippery intestines, which slowly oozed, like eels, through the gore and down his legs. When the bloody snakes ran into the sergeant's shoes, Avraham puked.

Avraham, having never before witnessed death, staggered to the front door and cried into the rain for help. Minutes later, he heard the wailing siren of an ambulance. The gendarmerie and medical attendants pushed through a crowd of the curious. As the police interrogated him, an agitated Avraham walked backward and forward repeating, "*Vey iz mir*" (Woe is me). Could he identify the men? Why was the sergeant alone in the shop? Where were the other barbers?

"I can tell you," said the investigating officer, "it looks suspicious to me. You and Sergeant Jenkins were alone by yourselves. Two unidentified men riddle the sergeant and leave you untouched. It smells like a setup."

By the time the police left, with the admonition that Avraham be available for further questioning, the barber had already begun his characteristic parsing of words. His mother, a literature teacher, had taught him that both letters and life require close reading. Had his aunt not read the meaning of the priest's muttering at a café, his family would not have escaped the Kishinev pogrom of 1903—a time when the clergy incited mobs to kill Jews. On her advice, Mr. Bahar had bribed a Greek tailor to hide them in the event of a riot. Avraham and his family had escaped harm and emigrated to Tirana, where they resettled and changed their name in the hope of living free of anti-Semitism. But that was twenty-eight years ago, when Avraham was eighteen.

But now Avraham had to face a new reality: "Death to foreigners." The absence of the word "the," as in "the foreigners," meant the assassins wanted all non-Albanians out of the country, not just the British. His parents had openly spoken Russian and readily admitted that they had emigrated from Kishinev. And what of the police officer's words, which all but accused him of engaging in a setup? "It looks more than a bit suspicious to me." And the initial phrase, "I can tell you," emphasized the point that the officer had no doubts about the killers' accomplice. And don't forget the accusatory diction, Avraham told himself. The word "riddled" he wouldn't even begin to fractionate.

The next day, as he followed his usual path to work through the bazaar, with its maze of cobbled crooked streets, he was stopped at a roadblock by two Albanian soldiers in poorly fitting uniforms and unpolished leather boots. Groups of women dressed from head to toe in black burqas, with narrow eye slits, squatted by a wall, their embroideries spread out before them on inexpensive Turkish rugs, while across the way sat a chaos of other vendors, selling charcoal, vegetables, chickens, eggs, fruit, firewood, pots, trinkets, baskets, and rope. The only unveiled women were dark-skinned Gypsies, who were reading fortunes and using short-handled brooms to sweep up the market refuse. Off to one side, under a porch roof, moneylenders haggled over percentages. All across this city of thirty-two thousand people, the government, determined to catch the assassins, had posted descriptions of the killers and put up roadblocks.

“Your papers!” demanded one of the soldiers, folding his arms and slyly holding out a hand to indicate that baksheesh would do as well.

Avraham shook his head in despair. Reaching for his papers, he remarked, “I can remember when people doffed their caps at one another. Now they ask them for identification—or bribes.”

“Idiot!” said the second soldier. “We are merely collecting for the poor.”

“Preventing poverty with charity,” Avraham remarked, “is as effective as making a bullet out of shit.”

The blow to the nose happened so quickly that Avraham never saw the soldier swing the butt of his rifle. Kneeling on the ground, he wiped the blood from his face. In the distance, he could hear one of the soldiers laughing and repeating, “A bullet out of shit.”

Two days later, he paid the groundskeeper of the Jewish cemetery a large sum to have his parent plots cared for in perpetuity. In front of their marble stones, he silently spoke to them, occasionally reaching down to remove an offending weed. As he read the dates of their deaths, Esther Bahar, 1921, Isaac Bahar, 1927, he remembered attending one of his mother’s classes in Tirana, where she taught both Russian and English, and his father giving Turkish haircuts to men of every nationality: Muslim, Christians, and Jews. He consoled himself knowing that in exile he would be taking with him sacred memories and, of course, his handsomely painted *matryoshka* doll, the one that his mother had given him on his sixth birthday, the one that told Pushkin’s fairy tale of Ruslan and Liudmila. Avraham’s mother had used the nested doll to teach him that most great writers, even the incomparable Shakespeare, root their tales in a family. By exploring how parents and children relate to one another and how their travails affect other family members, even outsiders, writers create a nested fiction.

On his way home from the cemetery, he felt the weight of his impending decision: whether to remain in Albania or leave for Russia. The comforts of his house would be hard to forsake—a bath and a kitchen range, a sitting room and a fireplace—even though a poor draft allowed smoke to befog the house and drive the scorpions from their hiding places. But at least he could afford the price of wood these days, not many could. Best of all, the house had a large garden, enclosed by a high brick wall and dozens of trees: walnut, cherry, plum, fig, and thorn. He likened gardening, his passion, to barbering. Both required pruning and trimming, clipping and cutting, and a sense of shape and design. Some trees leafed low, some high, just as he shaved some sideburns above the ears, some below.

In the Jewish quarter, Avraham had heard whispers that a single silver candlestick could buy passage to Skopje, where fellow congregants would hide a person until it was safe to cross into Rumania, then Moldavia, and finally Ukraine, where a new society, a democratic one, had begun to take shape. When he had first shared his thoughts of emigrating with Rubin Bélawitz, his rotund childhood confidant and a woodcarver, Rubin had cut him short.

“The Tsar may have been deposed, but Russia’s no paradise. If you think so, you’re dreaming. You know the adage: ‘Ivan will always be Ivan.’”

Avraham had replied by mentioning some of the Jews in the new Soviet government: Kaganovich, Kamenev, Litvinov, Mekhlis, Pauker, Radek, Sverdlov, Trotsky, Uritsky, Yakolev, Zinoviev. Was their presence not a portent of a new order, one without religious hatred? At least in Russia, a Jew could live safely.

“If the country’s so wonderful, why do all the different nationalities, including the Jews, want to speak their own language? They should all be glad to speak the same tongue. It’s just lucky for you that you know how to speak it—and Yiddish.”

“We are dying here, Rubin. Albania is dying.”

For many days after the grisly murder, Avraham ruefully looked out the front window of his

barbershop, the same one his father had opened in the shadow of a mosque. At that moment, the muezzin's voice sounded, calling the faithful to prayer, and Avraham recalled the old Muslim aristocracy demanding perfect pruning and perfume for their finely fashioned beards. But that was before the worldwide depression had put an end to silk robes and imported cigarettes and a costume palace guard, a time before the Albanian government of King Ahmet Bey Zog was forced to import grain from Fascist Italy and dance to Mussolini's tunes. The fancy carriages and plumed horses that used to sound a merry tune as they passed down the streets had disappeared into the vortex of European bankruptcy. Handsome homes had fallen into disrepair, gardens gone to seed. Even the professors and poets who would sit in the barbershop quoting from journals and exchanging literary ideas had disappeared. So too the gazettes featuring serialized literary novels, now replaced with patriotic stories extolling the impoverished homeland. The barbershop no longer rang with the political arguments among Greeks, Russians, Armenians, Serbs, Mingrelians, Azerians, and Kurds who would huddle around the charcoal burner, sipping Turkish tea, and weigh the virtues of independence or confederation. All gone. Now the barber chairs and benches stood empty, gauging the auguries of the future.

Avraham had but one *naches* (joy) as he stared at the wind-tossed trash and watched two men fighting over the carcass of a dead cat. Thank god that his parents had not lived to witness the troubled times: Fascism in Italy, Nazis in Germany, the Balkans in turmoil, crushing debt in Albania, and the attempt the year before in Vienna on King Zog's life. Little wonder that people of all faiths were fleeing, the roads clogged with wagons and carts. The newspapers were saying that planes would no longer take bookings and that Greece and Macedonia, unable to handle the mass exodus, had sent troops to seal their borders. It could be only a matter of time until Albania stopped issuing emigration visas.

Should he leave or should he stay? Tirana was home to his parents' graves, to his friends, like dear Rubin Bélawitz, to his barbershop, his house and trees, his memories. King Zog was a liberal monarch well aware of the danger Italy posed. Political disruptions were fugacious; they came and went. Perhaps this one would also blow over, in which case why quit the country? The familiar streets of Tirana were as much a part of him as his own limbs. Here he could see dancing dervishes, sheep slaughtered in the squares for the Bajram feast, turbaned Muslim priests, and bearded Christian bishops. Tirana had airmail and passenger service, electric lights, military and civil hospitals, and traditional bakeries that still prepared his favorite bread dough, *Valya*, in the old-fashioned way: thick, coated with paprika and olive oil, and then shaped into a circle and baked. He had often brought his neighbors *Valya* bread to repay their many kindnesses. To leave such people and this city was tantamount to amputating a limb.

On the other hand, Tirana had no sewer lines or water pipes, no buses or trams, no railways. Roads were generally deep-worn tracks that became muddy ditches in the rain. Half-naked beggars constantly pulled at one's sleeves; fanatical Sunni Turks conspired in cafés and swore allegiance to the sultan; corruption was rampant; eligible Jewish women were in short supply. And, perhaps worst of all, he feared that the freedoms he enjoyed as a Jew would be lost under Fascism.

Assiduously studying the newspapers and questioning his every customer, he worried that if he remained too long, he might lose the chance to leave. Like a spiritual accountant, he totted up and weighed all his outstanding moral debts and loans and collateral and promissory notes and good intentions, met and unmet. As so often happens, his decision came not from a careful reading of his human balance sheet, but from events beyond his control. When he saw Albanian brown shirts marching in the street and read Mussolini's demands that Albania pay for its debts to Italy by granting

If Duce control of the sugar, telegraph, and electrical monopolies, and that King Zog make the teaching of the Italian language compulsory in all schools, he lost all his parsing reservations and decided to flee before all the borders closed and checkpoints appeared on the roads leading in and out of major towns.

To purchase his escape, Avraham sold his barbering equipment at a loss to a competitor on the other side of Tirana. His shop was purchased by a Tajik barber who attended the neighboring mosque. Well known for his haggling, the man pursued a simple strategy: he stated his price and then fell silent. In the end, Avraham received half of what he had asked for. His last painful task was to say goodbye to Rubin. They agreed to have dinner at the Juvenilja restaurant on Avraham's last night in Tirana. Fortunately neither man, unlike their parents, observed the dietary laws, because Rubin suggested the main course of *kukurec*, stuffed sheep's intestines, dipped in yogurt and red wine, followed by a salad of roasted red peppers, onions, and toasted walnuts. At first, Avraham's broken nose sustained the conversation. But then Rubin, wishing to make light of that unfortunate subject, tried another tactic. "Do you remember our camping trips in the Dajti Mountains? Such wonderful days!"

"When it didn't rain."

"Who noticed? We made a fire and played cards and talked about which girls we had and we hadn't. And no matter how many times you tried, you could never persuade Dominika."

"True," said Avraham, fondling the corner of his napkin.

"Such a dark-haired temptress. Now she's married to a farmer."

"Marta, remember her?" He paused. "I thought I loved her."

"Did she ever answer your letters?"

"Never," he sighed.

"Just as well. She was too religious for your tastes."

"My tastes?" He held up the palms of his hands. "What are they? How does anyone know himself? Our heads always get in the way."

Through the restaurant window, they observed in the distance fractured lightning marbling the darkness.

"Albania is black," Avraham remarked, "but in Russia a new day is dawning."

Scoffing, Rubin said, "I don't believe in omens."

"I'm no political philosopher, Rubin, but from the reading I've done, I really think the measure of a government is not how well it treats the powerful but rather the weak."

"Avraham, tell me. Who are these weak you cry over: thieving Gypsies and Muslims with forty wives and fifteen children?"

"No," Avraham sadly replied, "most of the people."

Rubin shook his head skeptically. Avraham looked at Rubin's fat cheeks and thought that he had never wanted for a meal.

"You can't name a dozen."

"The crippled, the paralyzed, the limbless, the blind, the beggars, the hungry, the out of work, the stateless refugees, the dispossessed, the Christians, the Jews . . ."

"*Genug* (Enough)! That's twelve. In other words, you're mostly talking about the sick and the poor."

"Which is most of the world."

"No government can solve the problem of hunger."

"Socialism?"

"Even if you could persuade people to share—and I don't believe you can—there are only so many steaks, so many houses, so many jobs." He laughed censoriously. "Even just so much caviar."



Avraham studied the fading light. The lightning had ceased, and the moon sat on a ridge, as resting before rising. To lighten the weight of parting, Rubin manufactured a chuckle and said:

“You mentioned our camping trips. Do you remember our lying on the ground and imagining the above us, somewhere in that starry plenitude, planets existed where people lived the Law?”

Rubin wiped his mouth with the napkin and slapped the table. “When Hillel said, ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary,’ he was stating the Golden Rule. A dream it is. You notice, don’t you, he left out all the difficult parts, the commentary.”

With more hope than assurance, Avraham responded, “Where I’m going is a better world.”

“Such a place exists only in words.”

Eventually theirs faltered, a sign that it was time to part. Rubin insisted on paying for the meal, but before leaving the table, he touched his friend on the hand and said:

“I have a gift for you.”

He handed Avraham a small package.

Rubin watched intently as Avraham untied the string and opened a teakwood box, revealing a hand-carved razor that Rubin had fashioned.

“It’s a copy of my favorite . . .”

Rubin interjected, “Same color, same length, same turquoise facing.” He added proudly, “A perfect replica, even to the raised edge that looks like a closed blade.”

“It’s a work of art.”

“Feel the finish . . . like your own razor. See for yourself.”

Avraham turned the carving over and over, admiring its exactitude. His smile indicated pleasure but also mystification.

“Yes, I know, you’re thinking what can I do with this wood carving. I could say treat it as a knickknack or display it in your barbershop.” He shyly looked at his hands. “I just wanted to give you something that would remind you of Tirana . . . and me.”

“But I have nothing for you.”

“You’ve given me years of friendship.”

“If you keep talking this way, Rubin . . .” He choked on the words.

\* \* \*

At the Lana River, where the bullfrogs filled the still darkness of summer nights, they embraced and parted. Rubin, sick with sorrow, slunk across the bridge, remembering how Avraham used to make loneliness strange with his presence. But Avraham was now persuaded that survival eclipsed friendship. He unlocked his front door, packed two cane baskets, one with food, the other with his barbering equipment and personal items, like the nested doll he had removed from his shop. In his bathroom mirror, he studied his collapsed nose bridge. His was no longer the handsome face and Roman visage that an Italian client had once compared to Vatican canvases, perhaps because of his Mediterranean coloring and the sensuous full lips he had inherited from his mother. From his father he owed his soft-spokenness, strong hands, and long narrow fingers. His sharp facial features were accentuated by high cheekbones and a narrow chin. Having always wished to stand six feet tall, he had missed the mark by three inches. Besides his broken nose, he bore other signs of wear: a thinning hairline and legs with prominent varicose veins, a barber’s bane.

He made it a point to leave his small house unlocked, for beggars to bed there. Wending his way along the cobblestone alleys in the wretched precincts of the Gypsy village, from which the

government drew its *hamals* (blacksmiths) and Gypsy men to execute stray dogs and cart away rubbish, he was stopped by a woman who begged a penny to read his palm. A small charcoal brazier glowed in the dark, casting a copper light across her uneven features and dark eyes. With his future in mind, the barber dug out a coin and seated himself on her rug. In the cold night, the Gypsy's words left him bewildered.

“Beware the man who wants his face  
Visible in every place.  
The devil has just one intent,  
To change the world to excrement.  
Goodness has a thousand cares,  
And can't escape the Hydra's stares.”

\* \* \*

When he entered the Dajti Mountains, east of Tirana, he wore on his back his whole store of clothes: three shirts, two pairs of pants, a heavy sheepskin jacket and mittens, a woolen cap with earflaps, and a muffler that his mother had knit. From his innumerable walks in these woods, many of the paths were as familiar as Tirana's streets and buildings, as were the mountain eagles and hawks, roosting in the trees, and the black woodpeckers, beating their recognizable rat-a-tat-tat. Here resided the real soul of Albania: the beech trees and Eve's Edenic song issuing from the rictuses of birds.

He had taken the precaution of wearing galoshes, knowing that underfoot the ground would be wet from the frequent rains. Soon the forest floor would be blanketed with snow, and each morning would reveal the footprints of hares and otters and wolves, to say nothing of the numerous bird tracks. As he walked, he looked behind him to see if he was leaving tracks. But the falling leaves and light rain erased the marks of his presence as soon as he passed. A life, he thought, was no different. As the religious texts say, we are only passing from one world to the next. Why, he mused, are some people remembered and others not? Through countless years of evolution, the different species had learned to survive by refining memory, remembering their enemies and avoiding pitfalls, like quicksand and sticky amber. And yet, he often heard people say that to survive, one must learn to forget; that the remembrance of pain past can kill. So who was right? He voted with those who celebrated memory, the form of bearing witness, without which he deemed progress impossible.

He had been told to move only at night and sleep during the day. More than once he was awakened by curious animals led to his scent. Eventually, he made his way southeast from Tirana to the rutted road leading to Bitola. From a hilly vantage point in the woods, he could see the border and guards turning back emigrants. The barber would have to bribe not only the Albanian sentries but also the Macedonian ones, whom he could see at a checkpoint down the road. His first impulse was to follow the barbed-wire border fence into the forest and crawl under the divide undetected; but he remembered that land mines had been planted to deter political adventurers. Several hours expired before he saw any means to escape. An itinerant cook, harnessed like a donkey, dragged behind him a two-wheeled cart. The cook had not yet reached a point at which he could be seen by the guards. Avraham scooted down the hill and asked the man if he might join him. The presence of a barber might prove especially profitable, one person preparing a meal for the soldiers, the other cutting their hair. When the cook paused, Avraham gave him a lek, worth a hundred qintars.

“Have you a government pass to be in the area?” asked the peddler. “It's off-limits to those without a license.”

From one of his cane baskets, Avraham removed a framed photograph of himself and an aide c

King Zog's, whom he'd barbered. "Will this do?"

The peddler stared at the picture, wiped his nose on his arm, and said. "Come on."

At the border, the two guards, awed by Avraham's picture bearing a flourishing signature, vied to be the first to have his ear hairs singed. Delighted with the results, they urged him to travel down the road to the Macedonian checkpoint, where their counterparts, friends from the old days of open borders, would have the pleasure of the barber's pyrotechnics. And so it was that Avraham passed from one group to the next on the wings of his wondrous barbering, waving goodbye to cook and country.

From Macedonia, he traveled to Moldavia or, to be exact, the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, where the local Jewish population advised him to continue east until he arrived at the pale. Moldavia, they said, harbored only criminals and corrupt government officials who would steal your toenails if they could market them. During his trek, he supported himself with stops at dozens of villages, exchanging barbering for a bed. In November 1931, still on the road, he arrived at a train station occupied by hundreds of Soviet military personnel. Here was an ideal place to pick up a few extra coins. Most of the men needed a shave, and with the train temporarily stalled on its way to northern Caucasia and Ukraine, a modest bribe to the stationmaster enabled Avraham to use the primus stove to boil water, and use the waiting room for his shop. When the train was ready to depart, the Soviet troops pressed him to join them, at least as far as Ukraine. His indecision moved them to describe the beautiful landscape, drawing on quotations from Lermontov and Tolstoy.

Through his train window he watched the great steppes, as the famed prairies of grain turned russet in the autumn light and gray in the morning fogs. Although his command of Russian diction and nuance fell short of his parents', he knew that the oft-repeated word "kulak" was being used pejoratively. What did it mean? By the end of the first day, he had made the acquaintance of a young Jewish soldier, with whom he conversed in Russian and Yiddish.

"Kulak," breathed the boy, "I doubt even Stalin could define it. Generally, the word refers to rich farmers who lend money, employ peasants for pennies, buy and sell, and refuse to let the government confiscate their grain and animals in exchange for foreign currency." The boy paused. Someone passed. "They hide or destroy their possessions, or even fight. But we know how to break their will." The soldier looked around and barely whispered. "We starve them. But you never heard me use the word. It is forbidden."

As the train lumbered along, it passed countless stations, all of them looking the same. Women and children, with distended bellies and bony limbs, stood with outstretched hands, begging for food. The first night, the train pulled off to a siding to replenish the steam engine's water supply. Most of the troops were asleep. Avraham slipped off the train to stretch and saw in the dark the outlines of a village that seemed utterly deserted. In the moonless night he stumbled down blue pestilential streets past dozens of dark windows, past burned houses and barns, past dead animals, past strange wall posters, stamped "GPU." From days of rain, the ground had turned to mud. Taking a different path back to the train, he heard a rustling noise and stopped to listen. Nothing. At length, he detected a human whimper that came from a dilapidated pig shed. A woman and two children, a boy and a girl no older than five and seven, were huddled together under a threadbare blanket, eating leaves and tree bark. Next to them lay a dead dog that the woman, with a pile of twigs at her feet, was preparing to cook. The skeletons of cats, frogs, mice, and birds lay scattered about, all of them devoured to the bone. Catching sight of Avraham, the woman scooped the starving boy into her arms. She handed the barber the living corpse, hairless and wrinkled, with greenish stumps for arms. Her mumbled dialect was unintelligible to Avraham, who held up the palms of his hands and shrugged to signify that he could not understand. Pointing a bony finger, she indicated that she wanted Avraham to take the boy

and feed him. The emaciated child felt like a skin stuffed with feathers. Avraham would have given the boy back to his mother had he not suddenly spied in the corner of the shed, peeking out from a thick layer of straw, the skeletal remains of a man. His genitals lay rotting to one side. He had been cannibalized.

Avraham took the boy, ran to the train, and laid him in the baggage car, which always stood open waiting for whatever farm equipment the eager young troops could requisition from those villages targeted for collectivization. The baggage master, asleep on a sack of corn, awoke and shook his head disapprovingly. "Too late," he said. "Bury him."

"But he's still alive!" a shocked Avraham exclaimed.

"Technically speaking but actually not," said the baggage master, picking up the child and throwing him off the train as carelessly as one would dispose of a cigarette.

Back in his own car, Avraham awakened the Jewish soldier and told him what had just happened. "Is it all of Ukraine this way?"

"It's especially bad in those villages that refuse to give up their private property for the greater good of the collectives."

"Is any part of Russia untouched by this . . ." he wanted to say "madness," but instead he said "policy?"

"One place, Birobidzhan. Although it's not been officially established, Jews from the pale are moving there."

"Where is this place?"

"Thousands of miles away on the Chinese border."

\* \* \*

The reason Avraham changed his Albanian names was owed to one man, Gimpel, who recommended that they bear some resemblance to his trade. Hence, Avraham Bahar became Razeer Shtube.

How Razeer met Gimpel is a story in itself. The night before reaching Birobidzhan, Razeer had stayed in a small village, where the local butcher, Mr. Cleves, had offered him a hot meal and overnight's lodging to cut the hair of his daughter, Anne, whom the butcher hoped to marry off to "the Yiddish baker, Gimpel." So great was Anne's body odor and bad breath that Razeer could barely cut her hair. When the barber was introduced to Gimpel and learned that a marriage broker had arranged for the baker to marry Anne, Razeer told him that the family was not *frum* (pious), ate *traif* (non-kosher food), and never bathed. She smelled of urine and feces. Her foul breath brought to mind the sulfur fumes of a sty. Gimpel, who could not think poorly of any soul, man or woman, sighed and remarked

"A bath and a toothbrush can cure many ills."

"Not a limp and a squint."

"That too?"

"More." He shook his finger. "She's twice your age, flat-chested, and has four grown children, and penniless."

Gimpel's face fell. "You know this for sure?"

"From my own eyes and nose."

"But the go-between promised . . ."

"Never trust a marriage broker. They are liars by trade."

From this encounter dated the friendship of Razeer Shtube and Gimpel, who traveled together to the shtetl of Birobidzhan, where it was said that a Jew need never fear religious persecution. Living among two hundred Israelites and a few Sabbath goys, Razeer would have been happy in his new

home, even though the land resembled a desert, but for the fact that the Orthodox don't barber the beards. Taught to cut hair in the Turkish manner by his father, who in turn had learned his craft from Albanian Muslims, Razeer had little opportunity in Birobidzhan to show, with scissors, hand clipper and Damascene razor, the range of his art. The women shaved their heads and wore wigs, and the men grew side locks and beards and long hair, which Leviticus prohibited them from trimming. Some of those Hasidic men, in their broad-brimmed beaver hats, had actually taken to heart the story of Samson and believed that hair loss would result in enervation and impotence. Baldness, akin to nakedness, diminished a man's holiness, forcing him to wear his side locks down to his waist. But Razeer told Gimpel, it took a *mensch* to cut another man's hair, to say nothing of rounding his beard so that the whiskers did not strain the evening borscht. To shave with a razor? Virtually unheard of among the Orthodox. If not for the few secular Jews, most of them young and lacking a full face of hair, the Damascene razor, a bar-mitzvah gift from his father, would never have been removed from its finely grained teakwood box, lined with blue flannel.

Mr. Bahar would have preferred that Avraham attend university, but the young man had seemed bent from an early age on becoming a barber, and had commanded the second chair in the family barbershop from the time of its opening in Tirana. In those days, expert barbers, always refined and well dressed, never regarded a haircut and shave as complete until they had flossed the patron's face with two thin strings to eliminate any cheek fuzz, singed the hairs in and around the ears, massaged the person's neck, popped his cervical vertebrae, and applied a cologne made from attar of roses. As an apprentice, he cut the hair of children and the lower classes; as well, he swept up the locks that fell on the floor, lit the samovar, served the customers coffee and tea, and, in his free moments, learned the craft by attentively observing his father. So quickly did Avraham master the trade that before long some of his father's own regulars requested that the son attend to their barbering, shaving, flossing and flambéing of ear hairs. Avraham's father took pride in his son's dexterous hands, one clipping, the other gently guiding the movement of the client's head, but he could see that soon he would not brook competition from any barber. A kindly man, Mr. Bahar, at the moment of Avraham's ripeness, quit the first chair in favor of his son. In his new position, Avraham would occasionally step across to the second chair and whisper corrections to his father. "You need to cut more off the left side" or "The goatee is uneven." His father never argued but smiled inwardly, knowing that his son would one day learn that even perfection perishes.

To stave off starvation, Razeer had to travel once a week to Brovensk, where the town's barber had recently died. At first, the local population worried about his place of residence, Birobidzhan.

"Are you a Jew?" they inquired.

"Do I look like one?" he said, pointing to his nose.

"You live in Birobidzhan."

"A bitter joke."

"Who?"

"Ah," he said, piously clasping his hands. "If I told, you'd hear about the treachery of mortals, but since I don't want you to doubt the goodness of men, which leads to despair, I'll spare you my story."

"The Lord bless your kindness."

If not for his flattened nose, the townspeople might have thought him a Jew. Instead, they treated him as a man of faith, cruelly used. Even so, they came to him cautiously. The previous barber, with a palsied hand had pulled their beards; he had also used a bowl to cut their hair. Razeer's first customer was an elderly widower who walked with a stick, had decided that if the haircut turned out badly, he could always say that he had cut his own hair, as most people did. But the old man came away s

handsomely barbered that several unmarried women urged him to come to their homes for a meal. With Razeer's artistry now proved, both men and women—healthy, crippled, one-eyed, blind, beggars, hawkers, priests, and prostitutes—eagerly sought his artful hands. They put aside every Thursday for “the barber” and seated themselves on a low wall, waiting for Razeer to cut their dark wild hair. Given the harshness of winter, the widower let Razeer use his barn, though the Arctic winds whistled through the cracks in the boards. He would have been the first to admit that even with woolen knuckle gloves he could not do his best when his hands burned from cold and hair froze.

His winter ordeals—as well as his life—radically changed when death came to Brovensk for Pyotr Lipnoskii, the blacksmith. His wife, Anna, invited Razeer to set up a chair next to the forge, which one of her three sons had inherited at her unfaithful husband's death from an excess of vodka. After a night of reveling at the tavern, he had stumbled on his way home and fallen into the creek, where his body lay face down until her oldest boy had discovered him at dawn. Out of respect for Mr. Lipnoskii, a regular customer, Razeer had made it a point to attend the church service. At Anna's request, he trimmed Pyotr's bushy mustache before the dead man, twenty years his wife's senior, lay in an open coffin in the municipal hall and joined his ancestors in the local cemetery.

After the interment, Anna asked Razeer to share a meal with the family: three sons, ages twenty-nine, twenty-seven, and twenty-five, and one daughter, turning eighteen. He gladly accepted. As they passed under the roofed walkway that connected the house and the forge, Razeer saw the rows of meticulously stacked firewood. Behind the house stood a vegetable garden planted with radishes, carrots, beetroot, turnips, and small onions, but no potatoes. Like many peasants, Anna considered potatoes the forbidden fruit that Eve had used to tempt Adam. Those who eat them, it was said, disobey God, violate the holy testament, and deny themselves the kingdom of heaven. Beyond the fenced garden were rows of fruit trees: plum, apple, and pear. On entering the house, Razeer discovered rooms without wallpaper, each wall painted a different bright color: red, blue, and yellow. Anna and her daughter laid the table with bowls of cabbage soup, sweet pea porridge, baked mushrooms, a bottle of *kvas*, and a prodigiously large pike, which had been packed in ice and shipped from the Volga region. One of the sons held up three fingers, and the family bowed their heads to say grace. Looking around the table, Razeer saw all the children peeking at him. He could read distrust in their eyes. It was not until much later that Anna, seeing him undressed, discovered his secret.

All of Anna's children had inherited her talent for survival. That three sons—Pavel, Dimitri, and Gregori—came first led the peasants to say that their births were a sign of the blessed Trinity, and the having a beautiful daughter, Natasha, was a further sign of God's love. Pavel, the oldest, was now the new blacksmith, and he looked the part with his expansive chest and muscular arms. Having managed his father's forge for the last several years during Pyotr's drunken absences, he knew well how to shoe a horse, hammer an axe head into shape, and repair metal plows. In addition, he had an artistic flair for wrought-iron furniture, which he fashioned whenever traffic was slow. The handsomest pieces in Anna's house had come from Pavel's sensitive fingers, including a table with a glass top and metal legs that looked like delicate flowering vines rooted to the floor. The mirror frames were all his own design, and so too were the handsome metal fence and gate in front of the house. He had one other skill that attracted notice: horseshoe playing. Crowned the Brovensk champion, he had traveled to other towns where he likewise won acclaim. As every horseshoe player knows, the clay that fills the pit must be just the right consistency to hold the horseshoes fast once they land. To stay in practice Pavel built a professional pit in Brovensk, and with the mayor's help imported blue clay from the Maloarkhangel'skoe deposit in the Far North, making Brovensk a center for horseshoe pitching, and Pavel, with his curly black hair and long eyelashes, a local hero and heartthrob.

Dimitri, the second son, seemed impervious to feeling, but his mother knew that his stony exterior concealed a great gentleness. From an early age, he had been a serious student, a fact that appealed to the GPU, the secret police, for whom he worked. A handsome man, sturdily built and always freshly shaven, his intelligence and Praetorian bearing led the GPU to bring him to Moscow for training in the black arts of spying. Like most of his colleagues, he had sworn to live a sober life, devoted to lead and country, and never to compromise the organization. Impeccably groomed, he made it a point to have his hair cut every Thursday at Paul's Hairdressers, popular with Moscow's beau monde. Despite the interminable wait that tempted him to exercise his right as a GPU agent to jump the line, he judiciously refrained from disclosing his government status and his attraction to Paul's assistant, Yulia Suzdal. Hoping that the two men might meet in the park one night and secretly exchange loving touches, Dimitri had never so much as hinted at his secret wish—and did not until he felt safe.

To dispel his homoerotic feelings, Dimitri frequently studied his signed photograph of Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, who had taken the revolutionary code name "Stalin," which combined the Russian word *stal* (steel) with Lenin; and he kept on the nightstand of his cramped room a picture of Feliks (the Iron Felix) Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky, the well-groomed founder of Cheka, the first Soviet secret police, and a copy of *Antigone* to remind him of Creon's predicament. Dimitri's devotion to the state was evident in his worshipful letters home about Stalin, whom he affectionately called "Vozhd," "Supreme Leader," "Soso," "Koba," and "the Boss." His mother kept those letters, which eventually caught Razeer's eye. In Birobidzhan, he had heard it said that the secret police, taking for their model Dzerzhinsky, prided themselves in their grooming. Perhaps, thought Razeer, a splendid Turkish haircut could make a friend of Dimitri, who might one day prove a valuable ally, as he eventually did.

Gregori, the third son, a seminarian in Leningrad, was a stooped, sweaty-palmed, pensive, pale knock-kneed, pensive seeker. In prophetic tutors and tomes, he tried to discover the Word, the one Truth, by which to live—and for which to die. On his twelfth birthday, Gregori had accompanied his father to Kiev Pechersk Lavra, the eleventh-century Kiev Monastery of the Caves, the source of h

faith. A center of Orthodox Christianity, the monastery sheltered rock caves that had been the origin of churches when Christians had been persecuted for practicing their religion. The walls of the dimly lit passageways and stairs had been fitted with glass cases that shelved thousands of skulls and skeletal remains. A number of open coffins contained the mummified remains of ancient Christians, their bodies covered with a faded fabric, their faces hidden under an ornate cloth. Some wore crowns to signify their church eminence. Only their parched hands, resembling tight-fitting brown leather gloves, lay uncovered, petrified by the porous rock that, like desert sands, had absorbed the moisture.

For hundreds of years, the Orthodox Church had said that the stuffy rooms were the place where saints rose from the dead. But when the Soviets came to power, they discovered that the monks had rigged several of the mummified saints with springs. As the ignorant peasants passed through the shadowy caves, the monks pressed levers to make the skeletons slowly rise and recline. The faithful regarded these movements as a miracle and gave what little money they had to the church. The Soviets, of course, hoped that by debunking these frauds they would turn people away from Russian Orthodoxy or to atheism. But at twelve, Gregori paid no heed to deception and tricks. He was moved by the fact that people had once cared enough to hew caves from the rocks to practice their faith. At that moment, in the heavy air, thick with incense and candle smoke, peering into the glass cases, he felt his soul swoon, and he knew his calling: He would study for the priesthood and serve the High Authority.

Natasha, an alabaster-skinned, blond, bountiful beauty—physically perfect but for one deviant eye that occasionally led to double vision—had the instincts of a magpie, always gathering to herself looted items. Her hands were never idle, picking up one object and purloining another. The items she kept for herself had, in fact, little or no financial value. Sensitive, she had a weakness for tales of woe, especially romantic stories of abandoned women, for whom she always cried. Like most girls her age, she wanted to look pretty and be desired by the most eligible young men. She rouged her cheeks and reddened her lips and kept her nails, both fingers and toes, pared and clean. For the most part, she sewed her own clothes, which she always designed with an eye to showing off her bulging bosom. The local shoemaker, whom she had bewitched with her fluttering eyes, had made her two pairs of handsome shoes and had charged her for one. Because numerous boys sought her, she came to believe that to attract flies all one needed was honey. Good looks and an attractive figure were a poor girl's best friend. She therefore, like many young women, traded on her beauty and drove her suitors into distraction with her practiced blushes, winks, wiggles, sighs, and coquetry. But from her mother she learned that what is obtained cheaply is valued lightly, and that what we regard as most rare is what we consider most dear. Alas, no one had ever told her that her greatest chance for success lay in the schooling that came to her easily and that she passed off so lightly.

\* \* \*

Razeer had long wished to marry, but had never found a woman to his liking, neither in person nor in religion nor in politics. A practical man, he saw in Anna the same balance between order and aspiration that he embraced. In her movements, he detected a feral heat, and in her role as the village storyteller, he heard echoes of his mother's tales. She was only the second woman who had ever truly arrested his attention. The first, a Tirana widow with plump cheeks, full lips, and an ample derrière, had regularly brought her young son to him for a haircut. Razeer had courted her briefly, and he had once even accompanied her to church. On the appointed Sunday, he waited on the porch steps under the rose window. She arrived, as always, with a babushka covering her head and dressed in black. He listened intently to the priest but could not bring his rational mind to accept the miracles that lay



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