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Kidnapped: A Story in Crimes

Translated by Marian Schwartz

1. The Twenty-first Century: The Boys' Departure

The boys' mother took them to the airport.

“So, Seryozha. Look after Olya, make sure he doesn't lose anything. Olya, wake up, get your backpack. Here are your passports and tickets. Call me the minute you land. A prearranged call every day, in the morning, the moment you wake up, and in the evening. So I don't lose my mind. Seryozha, make sure this happens. Each of you call me separately. If you can't call, just in case, I'm going to the embassy.”

“Mama! Isn't that going overboard? The embassy. Really. Are we little kids? It's not like this is the first time.”

“We don't know who's waiting for you. Olya, where are you off to now?”

“Check-in. We're late.”

“You'll go in a second. I can't talk to you in line.”

“What, we're being followed?”

“I can't rule that out.”

“Mom! Is this some kind of whodunit?”

“No, Olya, it's a soap opera. The Missing Boy-Twins! Ma, that's it, we're late.”

2 “Seryozha, don't joke. I repeat, we don't know who's waiting for you.”

“Our father, that's who.”

“Fine. Here's the deal. You'll each call me separately, remember that? Morning and evening. The secret word when we say goodbye is *tse*.”

“Tse.”

“Tse.”

“And don't tell a soul.”

2. The Twentieth Century: What the Historians Will Write

The frenetic nineties, if you bother to look. When Russian ships insured by Lloyd's carrying ferrous metal were lost at sea, when billions, let's just say, of union assets—meaning sold-off schools, factories, management's private homes, dispensaries, sanatoriums, hospitals, kindergartens, nursery schools, and training courses, and Party and Young Communist buildings—vanished into offshores, when entire Style Moderne and Empire palaces in Moscow, which had belonged, by tradition, to the district and municipal Party committees, were sold for a song. When abandoned factories fell into the hands of people speculating with those worthless pieces of paper called vouchers. When the proprietor of a billion-ruble business could be approached with an offer to give it all away, and after his categorical refusal, that same summer, during dacha season, at the reservoir where the proprietor's huge dacha stood on the shore, two divers were sent down. His bodyguards were grilling shashlyk, glancing over at their boss, who'd gone to cool off from the heat—and drowned in a second flat. Dragged down by his feet.

Oh well, the historians will write about it one day.

3. The Twenty-first Century: Next Stop Montegasco

Two young men with backpacks, whispering back and forth, boarded a plane from Moscow to Montegasco.

While outside, by the way, it was already the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Two handsome brunets with the classic profiles of those heroes-in-tiger-skins who Moscow patrol cops were hell-bent on hassling but whose passports for some reason they were less than eager to check. Who wants to go looking for trouble with foreigners? Dagos, they looked like. Especially because their backs were too straight, and even though they had bodybuilder shoulders, their legs were a little long for young toughs from some Lyubertsy or Solntsevo gang. And look at those toothpaste grins. Different teeth, too. Not ours, for sure.

You know. Theirs.

There was just one thing. Galya, who was working the check-in counter at Sheremetievo-2, looked at the second passport running and blinked: these guys had two identical passports in a row. Their full names coincided exactly, even the dates of birth were one and the same. Twins? But their names were identical, too. That doesn't happen in real life! What should she do?

All right, fine. This is above your pay grade, as military intel would say. Why raise a stink?

4 You'll catch hell for holding up the plane and get fired for cause. Different photographs. They didn't look alike.

So the boys breezed onto the plane, spent the allotted time in it, and exited at Montegasco's international airport.

Where a driver, Nikolai, Uncle Kolya, was waiting for them in the greeting line holding a sign: "Sergei Sertsov."

Two boys who looked like they were from the Caucasus approached him.

Approached, mocking someone, quietly to each other. He understood. They saw him. They clammed up.

“You waiting for Sergei Sergeyevich Sertsov?” one asked.

The other one guffawed again.

“That’s us,” the first one again explained.

They exchanged smiles.

As if their being met was a practical joke. Not taking it seriously.

Not so much as a hello. Here people said hello even in the hotel elevator, and when his boss had visitors, Kolya got them settled himself.

Even Kolya had grown used to civility.

Everyone here smiled at each other, just in case, but don’t look them in the eye, they won’t understand.

No staring.

But these two weren’t looking at him, just at each other.

Kolya asked, “Which one of you is Sergei Sergeyevich Sertsov?”

“We both are.”

As one boomed.

They guffawed again.

They’d come here to make jokes.

“Then I’ll ask for your passport,” Kolya said, surprising himself. He was responsible for meeting a son, after all! Not two!

They showed them.

Everything in the passports coincided except for the numbers. He had no choice, he had to take them in the Bentley.

They swiveled their heads, exchanged more smiles (he was watching them in the rearview mirror), and looked nothing like his boss.

Caucasus faces, for sure. Swarthy skin, big noses.

They didn’t even look like each other, for that matter.

They were murmuring something. Guffawing quietly.

He was driving them through neighborhoods where only billionaires lived.

Walls, trees, houses.

Villas, really! Past fences and parks. Just like our place. You'll see.

"Waldis Wembers' house," Kolya said.

Both made a face. Chances were they didn't know who that was.

"The tennis player," Kolya explained. "Ranked fifteenth in the world."

They goggled like morons. Their jaws dangled.

They looked amazed.

And guffawed again.

"Came in third at Wimbledon and the Australian Open."

"Impossible," one said.

The other one blinked and curled his mouth into a tube.

Morons.

Moscow riffraff, the driver decided.

Ignorant, they didn't know the first thing about what was going on here in Europe.

The driver always pointed out Wembers' house to all his boss's guests so they'd know they were

6 on their way to see someone who lived next to Wembers.

"He and his girlfriend drive around in a Ferrari," the driver explained.

Both these clowns started winking at each other, jaws hanging.

Then Nikolai waxed enthusiastic. "And a banker lives right here, a billionaire. With ten wives, who all wear paranjas when they go to the jeweler's."

He said it and didn't even look in the mirror to see what they were up to there in the back seat, making stupid faces and clapping.

At the entrance the driver clicked the remote to open the gate and drove them down the driveway toward his boss's villa, past his own so-called gatehouse (the door was shut; his wife must have been busy

either in the garden or the villa).

Gatehouse or no, Uncle Kolya noted to himself, it was nearly two stories.

And on top Kolya had done something mansard-ish with particle board walls so his little girl Angelka would have a place to play.

It looked like a shipping crate, his wife said, plywood everywhere.

Put something up yourself then.

The boss was waiting for his son, and now (the driver cursed silently) there were two, two con artists.

The boss didn't have twins, let alone with the exact same name!

His boss was worked up, understandably so, but he had no suspicion what kind of scam they'd cooked up for him.

These two brother acrobats. Then Nikolai calmed down. He knew Daddy Sertsov.

It was okay, he'd shake out this scam fast. He'd dealt with worse.

Nikolai the driver took unfailing pride in his boss.

Kolya had once been his driver, back under Soviet power, but not always. Back then, there'd been two cars for the whole department, and Kolya mostly drove the chief around. At the time, his own boss was a flunky and so didn't often get to take the black Volga.

Kolya may have driven the chief around then, but later his own boss figured out what was what, got himself into the Soviet of People's Deputies, and took Kolya along. Then came the good life, access to consumer goods, perestroika and guns blazing, and his boss laid his hands on a whole lot of something—three factories, actually, and two ships of scrap copper that they sank off the coast of Nigeria but were well and duly insured. "Loyt," it was called. His boss "drowned," too, basically got the hell out of Russia before the investors could investigate. Two of them went on television and spoke at rallies, too, two clowns.

His boss had done the right thing.

4. The Turn of the Twenty-first Century: Kolya's Story

When Kolya lost his job and went back to live with his parents in Tula Province, they leased three hundred hectares, a farm, basically.

But the calf-shed, garage, and all their equipment were torched. They knew who did it—men from the next village, because his father was leasing their fields.

That land hadn't been plowed or sown in so long that it was all grown up in aspen, but the locals took the lease as an affront.

His father had gone to their village and asked them to come work for him, promised good pay. They'd turned him down.

They thought he wasn't offering enough, and everyone wanted to know how much they were paying in Moscow. Right. How much they were paying in Moscow to work in an Arbat calf-shed.

But what do you expect from boozers?

His father hired refugees from Kyrgyzstan, ethnic Russians returned to the fatherland and waiting for their Russian citizenship. His father bought them three abandoned huts.

They'd only just started settling in when three guys with scythes paid them a visit and said they were going to slaughter and set fire to everyone, this isn't your land, it's theirs.

8 They were so small-time, these guys, as one old lady said later, they were mowing other people's grass on the plots of those deserted huts.

They drove people out over a lousy stack of hay.

But then they burned down his father's calf-shed and whole equipment yard.

People just can't stand anyone making more money than them.

Oh well, Kolya and his parents got the hell out.

The collective farmers promised to burn down his father's house. Even though they'd lived there longer than anyone could remember, so his father settled them next to his grandfather's place, on his land.

Both old folks were still living in that house. That's where they always took us for the summer,

Nikolai recalled in fury.

And we come from there!

It was all very simple: two villages, ours and theirs, forever at war.

Once upon a time, they'd lost an entire field to our people at cards. Well, not they themselves but their landlord, when they'd had one. And they just couldn't forget it.

So the young men would form a solid wall around the club during dances.

They'd always knifed one of ours in the forest on St. Ilya's. St. Ilya's Day used to be our church holiday, and they always celebrated it in our forest, in the Maples. And they'd range around us.

They'd sneak up on our guys, leap out onto the paths and attack.

One of our girls hanged herself. Then our guys went there to kill whoever they happened to come across and burn down their houses. So Kolya, his father, and his mama had to run away, joined his mother's sister's in Moscow, who worked in management at a high-rise and got his mother a job there as a dispatcher.

We got a room in a dorm, in the basement, with the Moldovan and Ukrainian janitors.

They all had families joining them, the more the merrier.

There was no squeezing into the kitchen.

After that his mother quickly scoped out what was what. Her sister had everything lined up, his mama helped out and eventually got a job as a housing manager in a new district.

They got his father a supervisor job in a garage and gave them an official one-room on the first floor for the time being, but the kitchen there was twelve square meters, so Kolya put a cot in the kitchen. Someone had carried out a brand-new one to a doorway around Patriarch Ponds, and Kolya was driving by in his father's van, a Gazelle—the people had moved, maybe, or it didn't fit, or someone died, his mother went back and forth.

Kolya soured on discos and mixing with Moscow girls. They got right down to brass tacks (“Are you from Moscow?” “Yes.” “Where in Moscow?”) and wormed it out of him that he didn't have two kopeks to rub together, was working in a garage, and officially lived in the countryside.

No one would even go to McDonald's with him.

For New Year's, Nikolai decided to visit his grandfather, and on December 31, at loose ends, went to the disco in his large exurban settlement.

Rather than sit around with his grandfather and listen to all the same war stories.

When his grandfather got snookered, he would start in.

Usually he was reluctant to reminisce and never did, because you shouldn't, but he couldn't help himself then, and his old buddies would show up from the next world as alive as you or me.

At the disco, Kolya met two girls, who got Kolya to take them home in his Gazelle. Home turned out to be nearby, but one more girl squeezed into the car behind them—a chubby girl from the disco, a real skank, you could tell right off. Jumped inside when it was practically moving.

The others started swearing.

They got to their house and she plunked herself down in Kolya's lap, started kissing him, fondling him wherever.

The girls pretended they'd never seen her before and tried to run her out.

So Kolya drove her home, and she invited him in, but no one was there, her mother had gone to visit family for a couple of days, she said.

The girl was fun and straightforward, didn't try to put on airs like those Moscow girls.

10 She said, "I wasn't the only one turning tricks in the field."

"What's that?" Nikolai asked, panting.

"Nothing, knock on wood," replied the girl who had given herself to Nikolai, no questions asked.

She even joked.

"Soup's on. Chicken tabaka."

Which is to say, she didn't give a damn.

Every word out of her mouth was a swear word.

Kolya was loaded, cutting loose, having a ball after a long drought.

The girl didn't object, either, you could tell this wasn't her first time. It felt like she was getting

back at somebody.

And she suited Nikolai to the ground. A fine girl, it turned out, pretty even—when he got a good look at her later, on the couch.

After it was over she lay there undressed. She'd dropped all her clothes on the floor.

He actually asked, "What's your name, beautiful?"

"You forgot?"

She answered with her full name, and as for her age added: almost seventeen. So still in high school.

How's about them apples.

But she looked twenty. Because she was fat.

He could go to jail for this. That's why it's called jailbait.

All the village boys knew about it and worried about underage girls' parents taking revenge and forcing them to get married.

But all the girls in the village that summer (they were from the city, spending the summer with relatives) laughed at the word. Not a one of them wanted to get married.

In the winter, there were nothing but old women left in the village. Nearly all the old men were dead from one thing or another. Only Kolya's granddad was still hanging on.

When he was saying goodbye to this new girl, he helped her get dressed, buttoned her up the back, and she asked him for his phone number.

And in February she phoned: she was pregnant. And she wouldn't be seventeen until April.

Kolya freaked out. She said he hadn't used anything, after all. Hadn't protected her in any way. And she was a virgin.

"What do you mean a virgin?"

"Just what I said."

"I didn't notice anything."

"I hid it. I was embarrassed to be a virgin. Sixteen and you were my first. My girlfriends would

have made fun of me. But I knew all about it. I watched videos.”

“What kind?”

“Porn, that’s what.”

“For crying out loud.” Nikolai was stunned.

“Yeah, I noticed you at the disco. You danced with me, remember?”

“No!”

“You were drunk. A whole bunch of us were partying hard. And I followed you when I saw they were taking you away. I know them. Group sex. They’d call in even more boys. I followed you to the neighbor’s especially, I realized who they were and where they were sending your Gazelle, they were grown girls, they’d come from Tula to see her, the niece. They were all twenty, if not more. That wasn’t the first time I’d seen them here. And then I jumped into your Gazelle, too. The faces they made! They swore at me and shoved, pinched me! But they didn’t scare me. I got there and sat down at their table as if you were my boyfriend. They weren’t sure who was with who. I started making out with you right away. I did everything under the table. Then I put on my coat and led you away. They went out of their minds over you leaving.”

“Imagine that,” Nikolai marveled, like an idiot.

“But you were the one who said, ‘Let’s go to your place.’ You!”

12 “I don’t remember,” Nikolai, the future father replied apropos of nothing, gobsmacked.

“You agreed to it. Do you think I’m going for an abortion in high school? So I can be a cripple my whole life? And kill my own child?”

Kolya went over to try to talk her into it, but her enraged mother was home, and she said right off that they’d put him in jail.

And they had his passport info, don’t you know.

So here’s the deal.

If need be, when the baby was born they’d do a paternity test in Tula.

Everything started spinning and fast. Her mother worked at a department store, she had

everything you need for a wedding, including German china, and she bought all the booze, Nikolai organized the refreshments through his mother-in-law, she took the order, and his grandfather provided from his own barrels, he was always pickling cabbage and cucumbers and sousing apples, and he donated a sack of potatoes.

They got married.

His parents approved his choice of a Tula girl.

Kolya got a job in Moscow and rented a one-room. Galina found work as a cleaning lady in a daycare center, even though she was four months' pregnant.

She was so heavy anyway, no one noticed anything until the seventh month, at which point she could go on maternity leave.

Galya was put on bed rest at the maternity hospital because of some bad tests.

Then Angelka was born, prematurely, early, and now they could pay Galya less for her maternity leave than she'd been counting on.

Galina cried at the maternity hospital, tied herself in knots. Angelka was underweight, but lots are born like that nowadays, skinny, the doctor told Kolya when he went to find out why they'd taken Galya to examine her for some reason, this was in the ninth month, the doctor from Khimki used the hook, and that night her waters broke.

The doctor said it was a routine examination, and you had to be prepared for anything during a birth.

And that was it. All this was quickly forgotten, though, because when Galina, Angelka, and Kolya had been living in their one-room for a month, Kolya's mama got a three-room apartment through her job.

And at that point his parents invited them to move in with Angelka!

Kolya was happy, went nuts buying and installing fixtures, whipped the apartment into shape. They'd been given bare walls!

He brought tiles from a construction site, bought them from Tajiks, installed it all himself, and

bought a kitchen, not a new one, but in good condition.

Life began, Angelka was already wanting to run around the apartment, and Galina wasn't working, staying home with her.

They bought themselves a fold-out bed and started sleeping with Angelka, since they hadn't bought a child's bed yet. Money was tight.

And all of a sudden, one fine day, his mother barged into their room in the middle of the night, without knocking, black as a storm cloud, and said, "Get out, all of you."

What? How's that? Kolya had no f-ing idea what she was talking about.

Galina, who after the birth had gone on a diet subsisting on kefir and groats, always wanting to slim down, told Kolya how his mother had been mean to her.

That supposedly Galina had eaten something from the fridge that wasn't hers.

But Galina would rather choke than eat their food. Kolya knew her.

His wife could be pretty mean herself.

She answered his mama tit or tat, cursing a blue streak. His mama had the last word.

Tula females don't kid around.

Afterward, Galina added that Irina Ivanovna had really ticked her off, she hadn't wanted to complain for a long time.

14 Implying Angelka isn't yours.

Implying I'd tricked you by saying I was sixteen. Sure, I did trick you after the disco, I was a good twenty already, and I was working as a cleaner in my mother's store. What, I'm going to tell your mama how I tricked you? It's not like you were going to marry someone older, a cleaner, and fat on top of everything else. I went to work for my mother because we knew she was going to die soon, I was helping her, the loaders were swindling her, and there wasn't a salesclerk job open.

After mama, I'd have become manager, I did graduate from trade school, after all, and I had a high school education. At the disco I liked you, you were totally different, not like our local boys, and I wanted a child by you, and that's why I got into your car with those sluts. I lied, I told you I was sixteen,

and when you fell asleep I wrote down your passport info. And took your phone number, so when I found out I was pregnant, I decided to fight for you. And when we filed at the registry office, you didn't see what I wrote for my year of birth. I had to preserve our family. My mother kept crying, she wanted me to get an abortion, and she was planning to hire a hit man to take you out. Five hundred dollars, hell, a hundred would have done it. There are numbskulls like that. Your mama may judge me, but Angelka is your daughter. I'm fat and older than you. I'm a cleaner. I'll leave, so be it.

Kolya sat on the ottoman as if he'd been hit over the head.

Find another apartment! But he had no money!

Kolya loved his parents very much. Especially his mama.

And now he understood her and his father. Even his older sister was against Galina. But Galina was his wife, Angelka was his daughter, he was used to them. He'd raised his daughter since she was six days old.

Galina watched him spitefully, blubbering. As if she'd proven something.

So she left to live with her mother in her village. She took all her personal belongings.

He drove her, and Galina didn't say a word. Like she was hurt.

Good thing it was April already, so it looked like his wife and child were going to the dacha.

He stayed on with his parents, only on weekends he cleared off to see his family. Without a word to his mama, let alone his father.

They didn't say anything either, didn't ask about their granddaughter.

Their own granddaughter!

Oh, how life had turned upside down, everyone now enemies. Galina was hurt that he didn't go to live with her. But where could you find work in the countryside?

It's burying yourself alive in a strange settlement, and she had a brother, too, a drinker and a brawler, as she said. He even came especially from Tula to rumble.

Over the summer, Kolya saved some money to rent a one-room.

So they could move in the fall. But Galina wouldn't let him get close to her. When he came he

slept on the floor.

His whole life was ruined!

It was at this very moment that he got the signal from Sergei Ivanovich Sertsov, his former boss.

Somehow, through channels, he'd found his phone number, and some guy called and said Sertsov needed a driver and assistant in a certain country. The address was a secret.

"Thank you," Kolya replied. He was thrown and didn't understand what was going on. "I have a wife and daughter now and I can't come alone, probably."

He said "probably" because he didn't know how it was all going to go between him and Galina.

What if she'd already found herself someone in the village?

Her old boyfriend? She'd had someone before Kolya.

It was true, Angelka didn't look at all like her father.

Both he and Galina were fair-haired, whereas the little girl was dark and curly.

His mother had been hinting at exactly that. That was probably the reason for all of it.

But Sertsov didn't know about Kolya's life now. He thought he was a free-ranging Cossack, like before. But Kolya was banned from travel now. He couldn't even imagine leaving to make money at this moment.

Galina was the only thing Kolya could call his own. His mother also had a favorite daughter,
16 Kolya's sister, who had a college education and an apartment, rich.

But Kolya, what was Kolya? Her son, who'd barely graduated from high school with mediocre grades.

They'd always considered Kolya backward.

"I'll get back to you," the guy said over the phone, and indeed, he did.

"Dictate all their info to me. Your wife and child's passports. They'll send an invitation to your address. It's not a bad living situation for a family, there's a separate gatehouse on the grounds."

The gatehouse turned out to be a two-room house in a park!

His wife started helping the gardener, and now she was content. Everything in their life had

changed.

Her memory of childhood, when her mother made her till the garden, something Galina hated at the time, came in handy now.

Galina was a real trooper, she mastered the gas mower, he showed her once and that was it.

She even managed to plant her own, Tula, flowers, herself. In front of their gatehouse.

Her mother sent seeds from their village, and in early spring Galina propagated seedlings.

Here, in Montegasco, no one had ever seen fragrant tobacco, or phlox, or asters, or gladioli, or dahlias. People in this village didn't know anything about them. Or coneflowers!

The boss, who himself had grown up in his grandmother's village, said right away that she'd had a front garden at her house, and now he was proud of his own unusual flowerbed.

A native Russian—here, where it was solid lawns. He would sit there in a rocking chair under the awning.

The boss's wife made fun of that flowerbed.

Galina grew cucumbers, too, and tomatoes, and dill and coriander! It was hot here, water it and it would pop up.

The boss liked crunching from a vegetable garden without nitrates and pesticides. No comparison to store-bought! Galina pickled and marinated bought produce for the pantry because there wasn't that much she grew, just enough for salad.

A plot the size of a handkerchief.

The next winter the boss thought it over, treated himself to Galina's pickled squash and eggplant, and then set aside room in the back for her for a vegetable plot.

And very late one night, Galina said to Kolya, Make no mistake, Angelka is your daughter, her little fingers are exactly like yours, long and curling, and her nails are like yours, pretty. My fingers, just look, they're different, peasant.

It's just my father was curly and dark, I guess my granny hooked up with a Romanian, they had all kinds of Romanians stationed in the village during the Occupation. My father was born after them. My

grandfather never came back from the war or he would have driven her and her little gypsy out, that's how they talked in the countryside.

She gave birth to him late, after her due date.

And his mother left with her fella, they signed up for a construction brigade at Shaturtorf. They left him at an orphanage for a while. A bitter cup! And all because of the color of his skin.

My gypsy father didn't take me for his own daughter, either, I'm so blond, Galina said, and she suddenly started crying. That's where my whole curse comes from. Everything that's happened to me.

She was smart, she understood everything that Kolya's mother had said about her.

And that Kolya had heard more than once.

"It happens, it's fine, we're over it," Kolya said, and he kissed her short puffy fingers. "Since I've got two Romanians, let's go somewhere. Everything's close here. When the boss and his wife are away."