

# Viktor Petrenko, Have You No Mercy?

By  
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He awoke startled. A close observer would have noticed his eyes open halfway and shift from side to side; his breath caught a moment then went back regular. He closed his eyes. The dream was as so many times before. He stood in the snow; the man put an arm across Viktor's shoulders, his other arm swung toward him as though to complete an embrace. He had a knife arcing straight for Viktor's heart. Viktor had his own knife. His knife didn't waste the time of a free-floating arc. He punched straight across his body, straight into the man's chest, somewhere above the heart. The man's arm never completed its motion, never reached Viktor. Viktor punched his knife into the torso twice more, below the heart, then into the liver. The man didn't look into Viktor's eyes. He looked toward his daughter, twenty-one years old, on her knees in the snow, ten feet away. Viktor let the man slip down. He held his knife at his side; blood dripped onto his shoe. The girl, a bruised chin, what had been anger on her face turned now into horror or something worse, crawled to her father and touched his hair – his hat had fallen off when he hit the ground. Her breath smoked in zero degree air. She looked up at Viktor, her eyes catching his. That's when he woke.

It was an hour before dawn, but he was not able to get back to sleep. When the time came, he showered with the other inmates, dressed, ate, and went, in chains, to the area where the van would take him among others for sentencing or other matters that required a court.

The judge was elderly and a "by the book" man. So his lawyer had told him. Viktor said nothing to this though the lawyer smiled. Viktor, his lawyer, and the prosecuting attorney all stood before the judge when he made his way in.

"In light of the defendant's cooperation and the monetary restitution that has already been made, I am imposing a sentence that coincides with federal and state guidelines," the judge said without looking up from a file. "Viktor Petrenko is hereby sentenced to four years incarceration at Sunnyfield State Penitentiary."

"Your honor," the prosecuting attorney said. He stepped forward in a sudden move that caught Viktor's attention. "Your honor. Sunnyfield is a minimum security prison. Your honor. It's a country club."

"Are you requesting to be a member?" the judge asked. He had been about to swing his gavel before the interruption.

"No, sir. But might I remind you that Viktor Petrenko was in our equivalent of the Special Forces in the Soviet army. He has been an admitted mercenary in a half dozen of the bloodiest conflicts of the past twenty years. Plus, NYPD suspects him of having had a hand in the killing of one Simon Buch, a former business partner whose head was found with a bullet..."

The judge put his hand up.

"I'm sure I don't need to remind you that *suspected of* and *guilty of* are two different things, counselor. Viktor Petrenko is guilty of tax fraud, plain and simple. When you have a different case, you'll know where to find him." Then he swung the gavel before more of his time could be wasted.

His lawyer requested a few minutes with Viktor and got them.

"You don't have to worry. Sunnyfield really is like a country club; trees, a pond, tennis courts, gardens. Very nice. I've been there."

This surprised Viktor and his face showed it.

"Well, not as an inmate, of course..." the lawyer sputtered. "Anyway, with good behavior and time served, you can be out in about two and two third years." Viktor nodded then turned to go with the guards. The lawyer stopped him. "Were you really a mercenary?" the lawyer asked. Viktor nodded. "Did you kill many?" The lawyer was smiling as though he were in the presence of a movie star or Hall of Fame baseball player.

"Many what?" Viktor asked. His accent was heavy and "What" sounded like "Wot."

"Many people," the lawyer answered. His smile was beginning to fade a bit. Saying what he meant made him feel a little ghoulis.

"Many compared to what?" Viktor asked. The lawyer shrugged and looked down. His silliness was becoming apparent. Viktor turned again, but stopped.

"I set explosives. Many years ago. A dam near a village in Africa. The dam made electricity. When it blew up, the water rushed and killed the village. Four hundred people maybe. Then the water with bodies was dirty. Other villages had no choice but to drink it, to bathe in it. Some of them died too; babies, old people especially. Maybe a thousand more. Then the refugees hurried away from the water and the death. We herded them, put them in camps, watched them starve, shot them if they tried to escape. A few hundred more." Viktor had his lawyer's attention. "This was three weeks of my life. Maybe two thousand dead. Enough?" His lawyer nodded and Viktor went his way.

At Sunnyfield, Viktor was shown his cell. It was late in the afternoon by the time he got there. His cellmate was in a bed on one side of the cell maybe fifteen feet from the other side where there was an empty bed. He got up when the guard gave Viktor a gentle push in. The man was large. Maybe six foot four, close to three hundred pounds. He was over fifty and pot bellied, but moved easily. He had a book in one hand. The other hand, he offered to Viktor. Viktor put down his bed kit and shook the hand firmly.

"Morris Hamilton," the man said.

"Viktor Petrenko."

"Oh God. Do you speak English at all?" Morris said picking up on the accent.

"Yes, of course," Viktor said. "Is my fifth language," he added.

"Oh well, fine. Listen Viktor, just so there is no trouble. This is my bed, and that's yours. The stuff on the table is mine. Please don't touch them."

The table had a small collection of books, some writing paper, and a pencil or two.

"Do you understand?" Morris asked.

"Yes, of course," Viktor said.

"Good. We'll get along swimmingly."

The men went to their beds. Viktor lay down hoping to sleep before being called to eat.

"By the way," Morris started. "What are you in for?"

"Four years," Viktor said. He didn't open his eyes.

"No. I mean what crime. What was the charge?"

"Taxes," Viktor said.

"Ah. Me too. I got six years, but I'm half way through now."

“Very nice,” Viktor said. Morris went back to his book. Viktor finally nodded off and dreamed again.

The dream started where it had left off. The woman caressed her father’s hair a moment, looked up into Viktor’s eyes, then a tear, fat and hurrying, rolled from her left eye and dripped to the snow. He awoke. It was time to eat.

In the cafeteria, which had a neon light that pronounced it The Café, Morris introduced Viktor to several others at the table, slapping his back hard.

“Taxes,” Morris said several times.

Viktor ate in peace.

That night, after television, Viktor’s dream returned. The tear dropped, the young woman let out a sob, then she screamed. “Why?” she wanted to know. “Why?”

A bullet ricocheted somewhere near them. They ran. Viktor took the woman’s hand and led her through the woods. She could not help herself from looking back several times. Soldiers, in uniforms that matched her father’s, chased them, pausing a few seconds at the sight of her father and his spilt blood. Viktor and the woman stumbled down through brambles and found a road. Viktor’s truck was waiting. They got in; it was still on. Viktor put it in gear. No shots were fired behind them. A mile or more away, the young woman screamed again. “Why?” He awoke. Morris was peeing and farting. The cell’s toilet was nearest Viktor’s bed.

The showers the next morning were different than what Viktor had imagined. Unlike the shared open showers of many locker rooms and prisons, there were stalls in Sunnyfield. The dressing area was communal but one could have privacy while bathing.

Most men stood naked except for a towel around the waist as they waited for a stall to open. There was free conversation, no guards. Viktor stood in his prison uniform, his arms folded, one hand holding a towel. One of the men who came out of a stall flexed his muscles. He had many of them and the others seemed to anticipate the free show. They were joking. It really was a country club.

When another stall opened, Viktor stripped. The attention turned to him. He didn’t want it. The prisoners made way like minnows before a shark. Viktor was muscular, but they were the undefined muscles of a gladiator in *Spartacus*. What caught the attention of the prisoners were Viktor’s tattoos and scars. Mostly the scars.

There were dozens of them. Every limb carried a bouquet of them. There were through-and-through gunshot wounds to both thighs, a calf, an upper arm, and his right shoulder. There were grazing wounds, some running four or five inches long, everywhere. Stab wounds, slicing wounds, hacks. The V-shaped wound of a surgeon looking for lead. Six round bullet wounds where the lead had stayed close enough to the surface to need only tweezers or pliers or a field knife or maybe a stick. There were shrapnel wounds, burns, and bite marks from humans and animals.

“Sweet Jesus,” someone said as Viktor got into his stall. When he got out a few minutes later, the dressing area was packed. Viktor ignored them all.

“How did you...?” The man who was asking ran out of question. He didn’t know where to begin.

“What?” Viktor asked.

“Where did you get those scars?” The question came from a voice in the crowd.

“All over,” Viktor answered. He headed for the door and everyone made way.

At breakfast, Viktor sat alone. Morris was pulled aside and spoken to. Many fingers were pointed at Viktor. Several times he caught men explaining the placement of scars, pointing to their own bodies.

Work detail for the morning involved gardening. Viktor shoveled compost into flower beds and raked it in. A volunteer, cheery, young and female, dark haired and dark eyed, instructed the prisoners on how to do things right. A guard stood inside the fenced garden. At the end of the shift, the volunteer introduced herself to Viktor.

“You are Christian, yes?” Viktor asked.

“Why, yes I am,” the woman answered. Her smile filled the garden for him.

“The Good Book,” Viktor said. He wasn’t much conversant with religion.

“I can bring you one tomorrow,” she said. Viktor shrugged. He didn’t know how Morris would take to adding a book to the collection.

That evening, back in the cell, Morris stood up as Viktor entered. Viktor crossed over to him.

“I must talk to you, Morris,” he said.

“And I, I, I have to talk to you.” There was worry on Morris’s face.

“Yes?”

“Maybe we got off on the wrong foot yesterday,” Morris said. He could tell the idiomatic phrase about feet meant nothing to Viktor.

“We started wrong yesterday,” Morris said.

Viktor shrugged. “Something wrong?”

“Well, I just didn’t want you to think that I was telling you where to sleep. Oh and, of course, if you want to borrow my books or paper or anything at all, all you have to do is ask. Heck. You don’t really have to do that. I mean... I mean take what you want.”

Morris smiled, but his brow was still furrowed. Viktor nodded.

“And you wanted to say something to me?” Morris prodded. Anything was better than silence.

“Oh yes, yes. Young woman from the garden. She will give me Bible. Okay if I put it on your desk?” Viktor asked.

Relief spread over Morris’s face.

“Of course, Viktor, of course. Consider it your desk if you want. There is plenty of room for a Bible. Are you a religious man?” Morris regretted the question while it was spilling from his lips; it pushed too far, too fast.

“Not yet,” Viktor said, pronouncing the words carefully to avoid saying “Nyet.”

That night in his new bed, Viktor slept well for several hours. He dreamt of being a child again and visiting a small stream overhung by the branches of trees, dark and cool. It had been a favorite spot and allowed him to forget the city and his home. A branch, a string, and a diaper pin had been his fishing pole, and he killed many worms, but never caught a fish in his visits.

The next morning, the lady of the garden waved him over. Viktor looked at the guard, leaning against the fence and not caring what the prisoners did so long as the shovels filled with manure didn’t come near him.

“I filled out the form, and gave them a Bible, very nice, I think. They’ll inspect it, and you should get it before the week is over. Probably tomorrow.”

“Ah,” Viktor said. “Very nice. Very kind. Thank you.”

She smiled at him again without knowing that her smile lifted his soul from the dirt and made him think that God could pity him if not quite love him.

That night, Viktor and the woman in the truck. She screamed at him again. "Why?" She held her face in her hands and screamed into them the same question again.

"He was going to kill you," Viktor said. He had to explain. "That knife was for you. You weren't moving," he said.

"But why?" she asked. She used her hands to wipe her face of tears and mucus.

"Because you are Muslim. Because he is Christian. That is how it has been for a thousand years." He looked at her a moment as he drove. He tilted his head a bit to show her that the problem made no sense to him either, but there it was all the same.

"But I am his daughter," she said. The rules of life had not made sense in this country for almost a year, but there were new facets of the senseless to uncover everyday.

"Doesn't matter," he said.

"But my parents divorced a dozen years ago. I went with mother. Of course, I was Muslim. She was. She was when he married her."

"So? He divorced her," Viktor said.

"She divorced him. He cheated on her. Often. I remember."

"Still," Viktor said. "You remain Muslim."

"I converted," she said after a while. Viktor had no answer for that. "I sent him a letter a year ago," she went on. "He never responded."

Though Christian, Elena had been helping Muslims escape those who would harm them. Viktor was being paid by Muslims in America to do the same. They had met some weeks earlier. They liked each, respected each other, worked well with each other, and had nobody but each other. When she told him she was going to find her father and where he was likely to be, Viktor insisted on going with her.

The old man was outside his roadside guardhouse, and Viktor saw in a second that there would be trouble. Elena's father was in the uniform of the People's Militia, dedicated to exterminating Muslims and their friends. There was a rifle leaning against the wall near him, and Viktor and Elena could not have approached him were he not reading a newspaper whose headline showed it to be weeks old. Elena ran to him. It was a move Viktor had not expected, and she got there some steps before him.

"Papa!" she cried. He dashed his newspaper aside and bolted out of his chair. For a split second he didn't recognize her. Then he did.

"Muslim!" he shouted. "Muslim!"

When she had stepped close enough, he slapped her with a backhanded slap. He turned for his rifle, but Viktor kicked it into the snow beside the guardhouse. Elena's father gave Viktor a shove while his foot was finishing the kick and Viktor fell on his back. Then the old man yelled out a couple more times as he struggled with Elena, dragging her by long black hair away from Viktor, around to the other side of the shack, towards the woods. Soldiers started running from another guardhouse a bit further away.

When Viktor got behind the guardhouse, Elena was on her knees, her father holding her head back by the hair, his field knife high above his head. Viktor rammed him with his shoulder as the knife was coming down.

"Run!" he told Elena, but she didn't.

The old man tried to grapple with Viktor, but Viktor had his own knife and the struggle lasted maybe four seconds. Then Elena was crawling to her father, stroking his hair, looking into Viktor's eyes, a tear was dropping. Then they ran to the truck, and she screamed at him "Why?" Daring him to make sense. They drove the miles to a safe area, and in all the time of the trip, he could not help her. When they reached the farmhouse that was safe for that night, they got out, and when her door slammed, he woke.

In the garden, the volunteer approached him with the Bible. It was a black hardcover with red edged paper, gold lettering and a thin gold cross on the front.

"Do you know the 'Our Father'?" the volunteer asked. Viktor shook his head. It didn't sound familiar. She opened to it and read it out. When she got to the part about forgiving trespasses, he smiled.

"Do you understand?" she asked.

"Yes, of course," he said. "But... Not for me."

"What is not for you Viktor?"

"Forgiveness like this," he said. "I have not forgiven those who have trespassed me. My whole life," Viktor went on, "has been to make those people pay."

"God can forgive that," the volunteer said.

Viktor looked about the garden; the men were lining up at the gate to leave, leaning their rakes and shovels against the fence. The guard was waiting.

"It take time," Viktor said as he started to walk from the volunteer. "Many sins to forgive."

That night, the dream. Elena and he reached the farmhouse. In the barn there were a dozen refugees. They would need to be moved soon. The farmer didn't mind groups passing through, but he got excited if they stayed for any length of time. That evening, Elena and Viktor spent apart, not talking. She avoided him, and he could not blame her. Whatever danger she had been in, he had killed her father. That was not something easily forgotten or put to one side. He left the barn and stayed out patrolling, watching for militia, longer than usual. He needed to give her time. Not, he told himself, that time would cure this particular wound. And what if she never spoke to him again? Would he survive that cut? Would he not then rather that her father had just finished his untrained arc through the air and that the old man's knife had found his heart?

When he came back in, it was nearing dawn. Elena was on the far side of many snoring refugees. She beckoned him in the dark.

"Won't you speak with me Viktor Petrenko?" she whispered.

"Yes, of course, Elena." He paused there. After having killed her only blood relation in the world, would it not be bad for him to presume to start a conversation about the cold of the night or hopes for a warm morning?

She was crying again.

"What should I do, Elena? What should I say?"

"Say that you love me, Viktor."

"Yes, of course, Elena. I love you." He felt a knot form in his throat, tears filled his eyes. "But can you want that?"

"There is nothing else," she said. Then, from under her coat and her sweater and whatever other layers she had on, she brought off her necklace, a cross, thin and gold. She put it around his neck, then groped her way into his arms. She whispered to him, asking whether he would be

willing to accept this gift as a token of their marriage because there were no rings to be had in their world and no minister who would perform a ceremony. He didn't know what to say.

She looked up at him when he was silent.

"Yes, I would," he said. "But can you forgive me like that? Can you have mercy like that?"

Elena smiled and then giggled and then found it hard to control herself though she feared waking anyone.

"Silly," she said finally. "Silly for you to think of things like this when the world is such. I give you mercy, I give you forgiveness, I give you love. Have you any love for me? Any forgiveness? Viktor Petrenko, have you no mercy? None for me?"

"You haven't wronged me," Viktor said.

Elena giggled more at his silliness.

"In this world, Viktor, everyone has wronged everyone. That is the only way any of this can make sense. To change things, we must all forgive one another everyday and go on. Do you understand?" He wasn't sure, but he nodded. "So, please, Viktor, forgive me, love me, and kiss me." She reached up with her lips and planted them on his. And though the night grew only sweeter for the couple, and there were many days, months and even years together, the dream ended there.

Viktor lay in bed. He remembered the day the police came to his house with appraisers. They took that house and another he had. They took paintings off the walls. They took four cars from the garage. Furniture went. Computers. His interests in several buildings were sold off. His half of a grocery store in Harlem was taken from him. Stocks, bonds, cash. Books, vases, tickets to an opera at Lincoln Center. All gone. Jewelry too. What had been Elena's before she died. What had been his. The ring that had come to replace the cross necklace was left to him. The cross necklace which had saved him on a dark night, that was taken. Viktor remembered just before dawn that when he had asked his attorney to report to him about how much all had sold for, how much of his debt had been cleared by the police auction, there was one figure that had maddened him. The cross necklace had sold for eight dollars though it was gold and though it had meant so much.

The End.