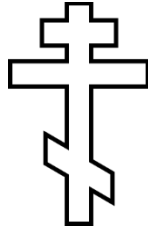


An Odd Pilgrimage

By: Patrick Abbott



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The priest was no stranger to being a stranger. Some said he was a recluse, others mad, and all thought him wrong. Well, all of them since his precious Sofka went to the Lord. Mockery and insults would fly from these cruel men and women. His pronunciations and gestures made others mad or amused. Sometimes the Tsar's men would arrest him, other times villagers pelted him. The sole constant was that society never welcomed the priest.

To Father Veniamin, though, being a fool for Christ was a blessing; it kept him close to God and convicted the world in error. The once-holy and orthodox Church of his homeland had abandoned the faith of its fathers in exchange for reforms from alien lands. How could they claim they had the authentic faith when the caliph was their master? But God in His own wisdom had let the world deceive the Tsar and the bishops, at least for a while. They called the true believers "schismatics" and tortured them. With their homeland corrupted, the priest's ancestors fled into the wilds where they kept the light of true faith alive, waiting for the day when God would restore all things. Until then, the priest waited for that wonderful day in his small forest chapel performing the Divine Liturgy.

There was only one place where his heart ached: his sole remaining son. His son had decided the priest was a fool when the child-now-man, Arik, had seen the grand signs of the world: lights, trains, factories, and the tall onion domes dominating the capital. Such a beautiful boy baptized in the true faith, tempted away by lights. The prodigal son's father could not had cried as much as Father Veniamin, the priest thought. Bringing Arik back from the pigsty to the Lord's altar was the only thought that drew the priest's mind away from the chapel his grandfather had built.

One day, the dark cloud of fate descended on the priest. A war in the far away Crimean Peninsula had called up Arik. He wrote a short letter, saying he was marching with his friends. The names he listed were obviously members of the fallen Russian Church, though two had to be Lutheran and one made Father Veniamin's blood run cold. How in Christ's mercy could Arik think he could be friends with a Goldstein? The priest asked God for guidance, prayed for his son's conversion, offered Divine Liturgies, and said the *lestovka* every day for Arik.

Then, months later, God answered one of his prayers. A letter came in from Sevastopol, telling how Arik was wounded and ill in a makeshift hospital on a battlefield. Father Veniamin fell to his knees. He knew God wanted him to go to Arik before it was too late. There he could save Arik's soul from the likes of the fallen Church and from the Goldsteins of the world. He spoke to the divine from the depth of his heart.

"Please, Lord, protect me as I go to Crimea to pray for the soldier you love the most."

With that prayer, he set out on his pilgrimage to save God's beautiful creature from the sins of the world. It was a long journey from his sylvan hills, past great rivers, and into the steppe. The newspapers called this land Little Russia, but the other name, *Ukraine*, the borderlands, certainly was true. It was the edge of everything that could be remotely Christian. Within a day of passing through the small neck of land into Crimea, Father Veniamin saw the blasphemy of blasphemies. There, along the road, was something he had read about but previously could only imagine: a Mohammedan spire attached to one of their prayer houses. Oh, how his heart wept thinking that weak Arik was exposed to such things without the sacraments of the truth faith.

The rest of the going was slow as army men, horses, and wagons forced him to stop. One evening, while waiting for a night march to pass, a soldier came up to him.

"Excuse me," the boy said with a city accent, "excuse me, father. Will you hear my confession?"

Father Veniamin glanced over at the small soldier in a uniform too big for him. The soldier did the fallen Church's sign of the cross as if that would convince the priest. Instead, Father Veniamin let out a loud sigh and started reading a pocket gospel he had with him. The soldier cleared his throat, waited, cleared it again, waited, and finally repeated the question. The priest started reading the gospel out loud. He didn't even notice the soldier slouch and walk away.

When he arrived at the farmhouse turned field hospital, chaos dominated. There must have been another battle, the priest thought. Would Arik still be in a bed? Or would he be recuperating somewhere else in the village nearby? Moans, cries, pleas to mothers and to God filled the air. The air closed in on him, the building shrank, it all became too much. Fleeing, he raced outside.

He kept running until he made over a mile in distance. Somehow, the smell remained just as poignant. He huffed and puffed against a tree, catching his breath. It was there his pilgrimage made an odd turn.

A queer, shiny ebony disk glistened in the grass next to the tree. It was flat, about three inches wide, and no thicker than a line. It was too big and polished for a button or coin. The priest bent over and inspected it. He could see no writing on the object. Suddenly, it made a noise like the buzzing of bees. Slight vibrations began getting faster and faster. The buzzing increased to a rapid rate. Curious, the priest grabbed the strange device. The moment his fingers made contact, a bright flash overcame him.

The room was white. At first everything was quiet, then multiple strange voices erupted:

"Who is that?!"

"Why is he holding one of our transporters?!"

"We're going to be in so much trouble!"

The priest saw strange men and even a woman, all standing with terror in their eyes. Each one wore white like some odd order of priests with a nun. Yet none of the men had facial hair. Could they be corrupted Westerners? The priest prayed that he wasn't standing among Catholics.

“Yuri,” one of them yelled, “what are you doing?”

A tall man dashed up to the priest and grabs his robes.

“Where were you last?!” The man demands of the priest.

Wide-eyed, the priest stuttered, “The- the field hospital.”

“When?!”

“After- after the battle.”

The man who the others called Yuri looked around and said a strange word that the priest didn’t understand. Whatever it meant, it clearly expresses anger. Next, Yuri took out a small thin rectangle that lit up brighter than ten candles. He next pressed something green on the screen.

Suddenly, the two stood next to the tallest building the priest had ever seen. Most of it was glass and looked like nothing he had seen before. Was it a new royal palace? A wagon-like thing blared an alarm as it rushed down a road made of solid black rock. To the priest’s shock, there were no horses pulling it. He wondered if it was a new type of train.

The familiar rotting smell burnt the priest’s nose. He looked down and saw men in two different styles of green and black clothing covering their bottom and top halves along with matching helmets. At least a dozen of them lay together, not in peace, but with contorted faces. The priest shrank from the sight. As he stared into the dead faces, his mind untwisted each one starting with the nose, then the lips, and finally the eyes into Arik’s handsome visage. They all could have been his son. No, he thought, these couldn’t be his beloved- God’s beloved. Yet each of their faces was Arik’s.

Yuri twisted the priest’s head so they face each other. “Was it during the Russian invasion?”

Nothing about the question made sense. Russia was defending Crimea against the Turks and Westerners. The priest could only shake his head back and forth.

Again, Yuri presses his screen. Now, instead of being by a tall building, the two were in a street next to a collection of brick buildings only two floors high. Men with helmets and matching black uniforms lie on the ground. Some symbols on the corpses look like crosses, but there was something about one of them that repulses the priest. A strange symbol looks like two crosses twisted with their arms bent at right angles while rotating. It looked Christian at first, but something about it made the priest’s skin crawl. Next to the black-clad men was a man in olive green with a cap displaying a giant red star. From a hole in the star poured blood. The star made the priest shiver. This was not the Star of Bethlehem, he somehow knew. Yet his brain rearranged each face of those with the sickening symbols into dear Arik.

“Was it during the Nazi offensive?” Yuri asked.

“Na-zi?”

Yuri rolled his eyes.

Another button pushed took them to a series of wooden homes with thatched roofs. Men with Cossack hats and green shirts lay next to tunic wearing men with even larger red stars. Each one of them looked like Arik.

“Was it during the Revolution?” Yuri asked.

The priest couldn’t tear his attention away from the dead.

Yuri groaned as he pressed the green button again. Now the familiar farmhouse hospital appeared. The same doctors scurried about as when the priest panicked. But this time, each of the wounded calling out was Arik. Everywhere the priest looked, he saw his son in the wounded and dead being carted out.

“It has to be here,” Yuri said.

The priest nodded.

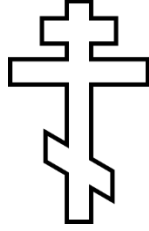
The man in white reached for the device, but Father Veniamin grabbed Yuri’s wrist, stopping him from pressing the button.

He knew then the purpose of this pilgrimage. God had answered the priest’s prayers in His own way. Father Veniamin knew what he had to do.

“Can you take me back to the other places?”

Yuri yanked his head back and skewed it to the side. “Why?”

“I must go back and pray for all the soldiers God loves.”



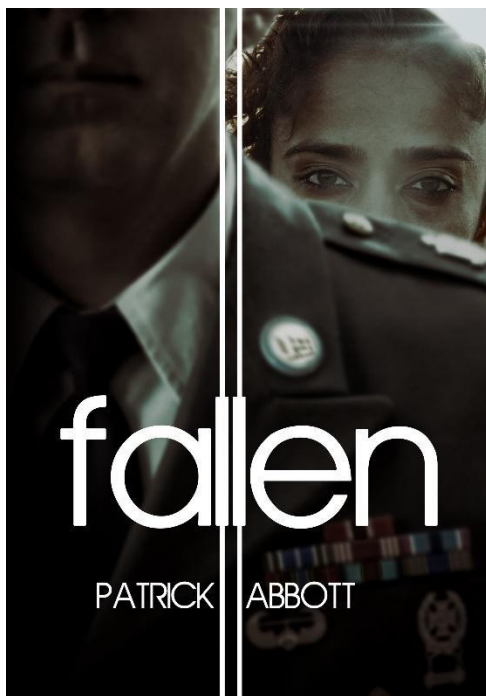
Thank You

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Check Out My Other Book **Fallen**



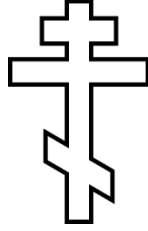
An Adventure into the Stars and the PTSD Racked Mind

Intelligence Officer Brendan Sean Murphy has served his country on the Middle East and Central Asia battlefields. However, his hard-won successes overseas came at the cost of failures at home. These events have drained his soul, leaving him racked with PTSD.

When he intervenes to stop an anti-alien terrorist attack on the subway he is thrust into interstellar politics with the government naming him an intelligence attaché to the Sabia, a race that closely guards its own secrets.

Militias, corrupt politicians, and countries seeking military aid from the Sabia challenge Brendan's mission. On top of this, a medical mystery complicates the balance. Brendan's only chance at success involves accepting the impossible and unutterable. Only then can he learn the secrets in this Fallen world.

Read about the background inspiration and learn details of Fallen's upcoming sequel *Risen* at www.patrickabbott.net.



About Me

Growing up in rural and suburban America gave me an appreciation of the outdoors and the world. Previously, I served in Iraq and Afghanistan. When I am not writing, I am active in my church, enjoy reading and the outdoors, and watch baseball to relax.