

RICHARD LOURIE

FIRST LOYALTY



FIRST LOYALTY

by Richard Lourie

HARCOURT BRACE JOVANOVIICH, PUBLISHERS

SAN DIEGO NEW YORK LONDON

Copyright © 1985 by Richard Lourie
All rights reserved. No part of this publication
may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or
by any means, electronic or mechanical, including
photocopy, recording, or any information storage
and retrieval system, without permission in
writing from the publisher.

Requests for permission to make copies of any
part of the work should be mailed to:
Permissions, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers,
Orlando, Florida 32887.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Lourie, Richard, 1940—
First loyalty.

I. Title.

PS3562.0833F5 1985 813'.54 84-25169
ISBN 0-15-131287-7

Designed by Cynthia Eyring
Printed in the United States of America



FIRST LOYALTY

To all its muses.

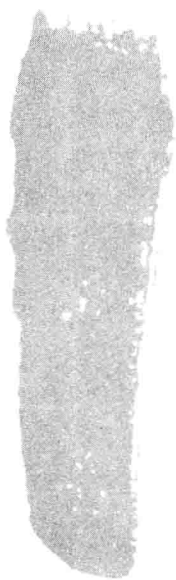
A poet . . . has no identity—he is
continually . . . filling some
other body.

—John Keats

So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts;
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters;
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause;
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads. All this can I
Truly deliver.

—William Shakespeare
Hamlet, act V, scene 2

PART ONE



1 "I'm being released tomorrow,"

said Najerian, who was standing beside Evgeny Shar. That day they had both been assigned to polishing television cabinets. The best job in T-52. Grinding glass for picture tubes was the worst. The plastic visors didn't help, and the fine spray of glass always ended up in your lungs and glinted in the blood you spat.

"Congratulations," said Shar. "Exile or home?"

"Home. Leningrad."

Shar knew what Najerian was saying—it was an offer. An offer to do a service. Some small, useful service.

Shar looked away from Najerian and out at the section of T-52 he could see. One of the real criminals—a stubby, neckless man with exophthalmic eyes—Venya the Swan was wheeling a cartful of unfinished television cabinets which he

suddenly propelled at one of the political prisoners, a tall young man with fluffy brown hair who had once failed to hide his contempt for Venya. A serious error, which had led to others. Venya was first among the criminals and allowed no one's contempt to touch him. Even the guards were careful with him.

The cart slammed into the young man's leg and he immediately fell to the ground. Venya the Swan pulled a sharpened pencil from his pocket and jabbed it into the young man's kidney with the skill of a doctor.

Everyone would say it must have been in his back pocket. Those intellectuals, always with their pencils, they should be more careful.

The shriek of machines was so loud that only fine shavings of the young man's screams could be heard.

Venya began pushing his cart again, back at work.

"He was stupid," said Najerian to Shar. "I even told him myself, I said to apologize."

Venya swung his cart around the end of the polishing line and brought it to a stop a few feet from Shar and Najerian.

"Here's twelve more," said Venya with a smile, knowing they had seen.

"Thank you, Venya," said Najerian, who was not going to take any chances with one day to go.

"He was a friend of yours?" Venya asked Shar.

"He's only been here a month," said Shar. "He was lost here, Venya. He didn't know how to act. He insulted you without even knowing what he was doing. And that's a very different thing from a direct insult."

Venya pushed out his bottom lip as he stopped to think.
“In a way you’re right. But mistakes have to be paid for.”

The alarm bell went off.

For a second Venya’s eyes shot from side to side and his body tensed.

“Anyway, he may live,” continued Venya. “And just so there’s no bad blood between you and me, here is a present.”

Venya pulled out another pencil identical to the one he had just used to puncture a kidney.

He handed it to Shar with a testing smile.

“I heard you saying your poems in the yard,” said Venya.
“I liked some.”

“Thank you,” said Shar, accepting the gift and the compliment at the same time.

Two Asian guards ran by, a blur of blue fur, black eyes, rabbit-white skin.

“I should get back to work,” said Venya, beginning to unload the unfinished cabinets.

One of the Asian guards shouted something to the other, reverting to their own language in the heat of the moment.

“I would take something out for you, Evgeny, a poem, a letter. I have cigarette papers,” said Najerian.

“And I,” said Evgeny Shar with a pained smile, “have a pencil. All right. Let’s do it right now and take advantage of the confusion.”

Najerian slipped two cigarette papers out of his side pocket and handed them to Shar, saying, “I am personally very fond of your poem ‘To My Daughter.’”

“Good,” said Shar, “that helps me choose.”

“You really know them all by heart?”

“Every comma,” said Shar. “I’ll be behind that stack of finished cabinets. Come grab me if there’s a lineup.”

The guards had ordered the machines shut off. As their screeching and howling died down, the prisoner’s screams grew louder, and now there was a jagged hysteria to them as fear joined the pain.

Shar spread out the two thin pieces of paper on top of a gleaming cabinet that had a three-inch gouge in one corner. He told himself not to press too hard or the point would rip the paper. But the letters had to be as minute as possible, which required perfect control over the pencil. He wrote the title in capitals: TO MY DAUGHTER.

Fifty men sleep under the state’s blankets.
I am one. In the hour of the dream . . .

More guards ran by. One of them gave Shar a quick, hard look. The Mongolian. He liked to hit.

The siren on the camp ambulance had just begun wailing as Evgeny Shar finished the first poem.

“Hurry up! Hurry up! There’s going to be a lineup!” shouted Najerian, his eyes enlarged by terror and regret. If they caught him with Shar’s poems in his pocket in the middle of something like this, it would be ten times worse.

“All right, all right, the second one is shorter.”

But Shar had caught some of Najerian’s panic, and he

could not keep his hand from moving faster, which made the letters larger. He wouldn't be able to fit it all on one side.

The screams were dying down, becoming moans, as they loaded the young man onto a stretcher.

"Not on his back!" someone shouted. "The pencil's still in there!"

The paper tore just as Shar was writing the last word.

"Come on, come on, it's a lineup!" cried Najerian.

Shar hid the papers in the cabinet and ran over to him.

"They're in the top cabinet, the one with the gouge," said Shar trotting beside Najerian. "The paper ripped on the second poem. The last word should be 'honor.' "

"Honor. I'll remember. Don't worry."

Shar took the place in the front row he had been assigned as a habitual disciplinary problem.

Camp Commandant Shemetyev, pacing furiously and barking orders to the guards, noticed Shar's somewhat tardy arrival.

The silence was terrible when everyone was finally in line. Only one machine whirred faintly in a far corner of T-52.

The Camp Commandant looked at the faces, checking that they were being offered up to him properly.

"I will learn exactly what happened here today," said the Camp Commandant. "Someone here is going to tell me the truth. The truth. Shar, two steps forward."

Savoring the containment of his own fury, the Commandant walked over to Shar and then looked at the other prisoners.

"Prisoner Shar, not only are you a poet and a lover of truth, but you had a clear view of the incident from your station."

"I was working. I didn't see what happened."

"What were you so busy doing—writing poems to be smuggled to the West to slander the Soviet Union? So that my fucking telephone can ring day and night with complaints from the center about security here! Guard, search him!"

The Mongolian guard who had given Shar the quick, hard look stepped over and began searching him with a style that combined violence with finesse. Finding the pencil in Shar's pocket, the Mongolian smiled happily, triumphantly.

The Commandant examined the pencil, which the Mongolian had handed him.

"The same as the other one," said the Commandant. "And stolen from us. We'll continue this conversation in the Special Block."

"Prisoners are allowed pencils!" protested Shar.

The Commandant nodded to the Mongolian, who moved closer to Shar.

"Prisoners cannot be taken to Special Block except for specific infringements of camp discipline, and I have committed none. I found the pencil on the floor."

The blow from the Mongolian's hand caught Shar right above the eye, at the bridge of the nose. The blood gurgled as it came out of his nose and ran down his lips.

"Escort the prisoner as ordered!" shouted the Commandant.

Catching sight of Venya's face as he was being dragged from T-52, Shar saw him give a shrug of sympathy and encouragement, but there may also have been a glint of mockery in Venya's eyes.

Shar felt less dazed out in the open air, though no less furious. He tried to struggle one arm free to wipe the blood off on his sleeve, but the guards' arms were like iron and he had to bend his head down to his sleeve. That offended the Oriental guards, who snapped him back straight before he had finished.

Shar could hear the Commandant behind him, puffing slightly.

A few prisoners stared at Shar as he was pulled across the yard, but most looked away. The guards didn't like it when prisoners looked, and they always remembered who had not averted his eyes.

The two guards at the door to Special Block I came to attention as they passed.

Shar, too, was held at attention, in the small office, while the basic information was taken down concerning his offense.

"Possible accomplice in a stabbing. Refusal to respond to questioning. Resisting discipline. Contempt of authority in front of other prisoners. Incitement to riot," droned Camp Commandant Shemetyev to the official at the desk.

As soon as the papers were stamped, the guards relaxed their grip. He was now the responsibility of the Special Block Police, who stepped forward to accept their prisoner. They were Russians. No non-Russians ever served on the Special Block Police.

They were less rough with Shar, as if to demonstrate their superiority to the Asiatics. The Camp Commandant returned their salute with a nod, saying: "I will return to question the prisoner in an hour and a half." Then the door leading into the interior of Special Block I slid open, and the guards marched Shar briskly down a corridor reeking of disinfectant.

Shar could not tell if there were any other prisoners, because all the doors were made of thick timber with only small peepholes in them.

They turned the corner. He knew the cell they were taking him to: the one at the end that was separated from the rest by an extension of the boiler room, the cell the prisoners had nicknamed "Happiness" because it was so very far away.

The cell door slammed behind Shar and ruffled the hair at the back of his head. For a moment he paid no attention to anything, wanting nothing but the relief of wiping the rest of the blood off his face onto his sleeve, which was unpleasantly damp.

They didn't have to do that, he thought, they didn't have to.

He shook his head and strode across the blue-and-red Turkish carpet toward the table, whose centerpiece was a plate heaped with chops and steaming sauerkraut. Before sitting down, he grabbed the carafe of vodka by the neck and took a long swig to wash the taste of blood from his mouth, then chased the vodka with a hunk of black bread he ripped from the fresh loaf beside the flowers, blue daisies.

He glanced with contempt at the magazines on the coffee

table, the Japanese video machine, the stereo. It wasn't enough! Though he sat down and began eating, it was without pleasure, only to feed his hunger.

He leaped up when the phone rang, knowing who it would be. Anton Vinias. Shakespeare.

"My apologies, Evgeny," said Vinias.

"They didn't have to do that."

"It was necessary, in my judgment. It's good for your legend. Four prisoners are being released this week. The story will get around. Besides, here's the good part: we're going to be forcibly exiling you quite soon, and the bruise will look romantic on West German TV."

"I don't need a bruise for that."

"Think of it as a combat injury, Lieutenant," said Vinias, resorting ever so slightly to the tone of the superior.

"So the exile is definite?" asked Shar.

"It is."

Shar said nothing.

"What are you thinking?" asked Vinias.

"That I'll be glad to be out of here."

"I'm sure."

"Will we see each other in Moscow?"

"Yes. Once."

"Good."

"Anything else?" asked Vinias.

"I am nearly out of my sleeping pills," said Shar.

"You'll be given more in Moscow."

"And when I'm outside the country?"

"We'll keep you supplied."