



**THE BATTLE  
FOR  
MOSCOW,  
IDAHO  
& OTHER STORIES**

**EDWARD ROBERTSON**

## [The Battle for Moscow, Idaho](#)

My severed fingers lay in the snow of the parking lot, flakes melting on their tips. Shoes squeaked in the snow. I had been shot somewhere in the chest with a bluish light, Peeper weapon, which I'd heard was nonlethal—none of us here had ever seen a Peeper outside their ships, but we got the radio reports and you were supposed to come back from the blue bolts—but half my hand was gone too, and there was a hole through my chest, and I couldn't move my head to check if I was dying. Shouting, the crack of rifles, shoes squeaking. Pinprick of sky way, way above me. Snow beneath me but I couldn't feel it. The voices of my squad grew faint. I forgave them. The rebels' voices thinned off as they pursued.

It was like remembering a blackout drunk the next morning: all you've got are moments. Next I was on my feet and rushing down the hill into town, the snow in the streets churned black with grit and gravel. Another leap of memory and I was down in the dark and the walls were shaking with a roar like a thousand trees falling and the dust peppered my face. Mortars, I knew, but I didn't know how long I'd been in that basement. When time turned back from snapshots to a steady spool and I broke out a window and wriggled from the ruins of the store into the soot-streaked snow, that's when I remembered I should be in pain but wasn't, like the minute after waking. I stood there, waiting for that Peeper gun to wear off. It was very bright out. A single bullet ripped past my ear.

"What the hell," I said.

"Hold your fire!"

Three men appeared down the alley to my right, one kneeling at the top of the short set of stairs at its end while the other two jogged towards me, rifles raised to their shoulders. I reached for mine, but it was long gone. I had a knife at my waist which I didn't bother to draw. They stopped ten feet away, skidding in the snow.

"Cam?" one of them said. He lowered his gun. I thought: That's my name. He pulled back his hood and I saw flat brown eyes, a sharp black widow's peak. "Your hand."

I glanced down. My right hand was white and thin but fine. My left hand stopped just below my middle finger. The ring, the pinky, they were just gone. The bullet, I thought, they shot me: but I wasn't bleeding, wasn't hurting. A brown-red crust covered the part where my hand stopped. Had I known this? My head felt foggy, stomped-on.

"Dan," I said, recognizing too the other man with him, a blonde kid named Nate. He was only twenty. He'd been a student when the war came. The third man, I knew him too, but I didn't know how yet. "What happened?"

"We thought you were dead," Dan said.

"It was a Peeper thing. Just a stun thing."

"It was crazy up there." Dan grimaced. Shots popped from up along the highway and echoed around the valley, the quiet, snow-draped streets. Dan grabbed my shoulder and I felt something tug beneath my coat.

"Come on."

We kept indoors, mostly. Once two of them went out for food, and a couple times all three of them tried a patrol, but they wouldn't let me go with them.

"You ever been shot?" I said to Dan when they got back from patrol the second day. "Before?" He gave me a look. "Why in the world would I have been shot?"

"I don't know. Because you're an asshole."

"Have you ever known anyone who's been shot?" He scratched behind his ear. "I haven't. Just TV."

"Maybe I'm in shock," I said, smiling. I could remember it, though. They'd hit us in the parking lot of the Latah Motel, firing through the snowstorm, regular bullets and that eerie blue stream of light slashing through the snow-blurred air. I crumpled, and as flakes of snow melted on the knuckles and pads of my lost fingers I wasn't thinking about the big things—the women I'd messed up with, the nephew I'd never met, the kid I'd hit with my Ford at dusk a few years back—I was thinking about Wallace. I was thinking how mad he'd get when we'd go to the Red Letter and I beat him at pool even though I wasn't any good. How he drove with his e-brake and the clutch even on the ice because he couldn't bother to get his brakes fixed. How he'd called me up both dead drunk a couple years back when I was outside Palm Springs for no good reason to say he'd heard about Beth. He had a place in Idaho, he said, and yes, it was Idaho, but I could come stay if I wanted. I shipped some stuff and sold the rest and headed up.

I stayed. Two years. Three weeks ago, before the war, Wallace ran out of cigarettes, like he always did, and knowing I never did, he started smoking mine. Get your own goddamn cigarettes, I told him, and lying in the snow I could see how Wallace's eyes receded, the sudden tightening of his lips. My cheeks went hot and I looked away and lit one each and told him of course he could have my cigarettes, but he should really plan ahead. In Idaho they were so cheap they practically paid you to smoke them, and I tried to bring up the words to apologize but could only look away. I'd argued with Wallace over cigarettes. That's what I did when I was alive. There in the snow, all I wanted was to see him again, to tell him I was sorry.

I blinked hard. But we were down in the basement now, lights off, no smoking, cells on vibe. We hadn't heard from anyone in days. Just gunfire, and not much of that.

"Where's Wallace?" I said. Dan shook his head, one quick jerk of his chin.

"We thought you were dead," Nate said.

"I know."

"Got him then, too," Nate said. He ducked his chin to an empty Sprite can and spit. I've been around a little and never met anyone outside the state who chewed. "They ran us right the hell off. Wallace was still moaning, but they ran us right off."

"Wallace was dead," Brown said, another local who'd worked at the Exxon back when there had still been jobs to work, the long-gone days of two weeks ago. I'd seen him when I'd gone in for smokes or been restless at night and driven over for hot dogs. "We weren't ready."

"Yeah," Nate said.

"Nobody was," Dan said.

"We'll get them," I said, and I felt it in my chest more than I felt the hole all the way through it. "We'll kill them all."

"I'm going out next time," I told Dan the next morning. Pale light leaked around the edges of the flattened boxes we'd taped up around the windows. His eyes dropped to the bandages beneath my coat.

"There's nothing to do," he said. "We should have left already."

"Then let's go. I'm ready."

Dan rubbed the dark circle beneath his eye and stared at me with the other. "You should be dead."

"You should kiss my ass. If you're going, I'm going."

"Goddamn it." He shook a cigarette from the pack he'd been turning in his hands and rolled it between his fingers. "Since when were you a patriot?"

I snorted. In the other corner of the dim room, Nate was bent over a coffee maker, mouth open as he spooned grounds into the filter.

"I still got my trigger finger," I said.

"You're the dumbest person I ever met," he said, but when they left after dusk I went with them. Cars sat everywhere, plowed into fender-deep snow on the sidewalks, wrapped around each other at intersections and abandoned but with the doors closed, like the people who'd run away from them had taken the time to make sure nothing would be stolen from the glove box while they were away. Of the forty-odd units in the apartment block down the street, three still had their lights on, but broken wedges of glass glinted from the sills.

"It's empty as spring break out here," Brown said. Dan and I laughed through our noses. I re-gripped the front of my new rifle with the remaining fingers of my left hand. We eased into the alleys behind the store, a maze of two-story apartments, fraternity houses, and dormitories. When I'd first moved to town Wallace and I had come to the beer bar here after a few at the Red Letter or the Villa. College girls. We hadn't been around much in the last year. They'd been starting to look how high school girls had looked for a while now—kids.

Snow squeaked under our shoes. After a couple blocks we reached the first real street, more apartments and university admin on the other side. We pulled tight against the corner of a frat house and waited. No people, no cars, just a slight but ceaseless wind. Dan's ears and nose were turning red.

"Church tower," I murmured, nodding uphill.

"Definitely." Dan leaned out past the corner. "Move quick. Shouldn't be able to see us through the trees."

"I'll take first," I said. No one argued. They knelt and raised their rifles. I couldn't feel my heart at all. I sprinted forward, shoes sinking through the snow. Nobody shouted or shot at me, just that same silence of wind and pines and blowing snow and my own crunching steps. I set up against a wall on the far side and aimed downhill. Dan opened his mouth and was cut off by the muffled buzz of his cell.

"Yeah. On Taylor?" He nodded into the phone. "Five minutes. We'll be coming down Blake, west side of the street. Four of us." He flipped it closed and raised his eyebrows at us. "Jim Gardner's crew's holed up in the woods across the football field with their eye on some troops. We're going to come down the hill on them and see if we can flush them into our guys."

"Sounds good," Nate said.

Brown frowned. "How about we stay put while Gardner runs them up at us."

"Eyes sharp. That field's a quarter mile, maybe less. I don't want them to see us till we're sticking bullets down their ears."

Dan led us along the backsides of buildings, ducking past abandoned cars, stopping every fifty or sixty feet to crouch down and listen. We heard them before we saw them, snatches of words yanked by the wind like the radio of a passing car. I knew once they were dead, Wallace still would be, too, and so would all the others, the hundreds who'd died in this town and the tens of thousands through the country when the Peepers touched down and the riots wouldn't stop. That was all they'd had to do, plate-eyed crazies, wade in while the whole thing burned, conquistadors in seamless ships.

I'd lost my fingers, been shot through the chest, but I'd survived. The students who deserted town, the families who stayed, they needed someone to stand between them and the rebels and the monsters egging them on. Down the far slope, I saw black lumps of men carrying gleaming metal boxes toward the snow-covered football field. I would shoot them, I promised, and felt stronger because no one could hear it.

"Here's where we fall back if they start hitting back." Dan nodded at a waist-high wall in front of the administration building just ahead of us. "And that's where we're driving them."

He pointed to the dark woods at the end of the long downward slope of Blake Avenue. "Don't overpursue. Just keep driving them to the woods."

"What do you think they were doing?" Nate said. "What do you think they were carrying?"

We headed away from the street, putting buildings between us and them as we closed. I rubbed my nose, but it was dry. I slid my gun off safe. Dan threaded us through snow-clogged sidewalks. Swearing and grunting and mumbled orders filtered up from the field. A low wall of junipers rose just before the ground began to angle downhill and we crawled to it on hands and knees and poked our rifles between the knobby trunks.

"Nearest first," Dan said. We bent our cheeks against the stocks of our guns. I laid the crosshairs over the breastbone of a man leaning against a stack of boxes and found, for once, my breathing and my heartbeat weren't jerking my sights out of true. Dan took a long breath. "Go."

The wood of the stock bucked against my shoulder and the shots clapped against my ears. By the time the echo rolled back from the hills my man had dropped and lay twisting in the snow. I jerked open the bolt and heard brass hit snow and sizzle. The men below us scattered, running straight away—only two of a dozen still standing had the sense to zigzag—and I peeled off another round, missing, then another and watched the target sprawl forward, sliding through the white. The survivors streamed past a set of goalposts and raced for an outbuilding near the T-intersection. Two hundred yards, two-fifty, but we'd knocked down five by the time they'd tumbled into cover.

"What now?" Nate said. A hundred feet behind the men on the field, the woods flashed and cracked with fire. One rebel broke right, drawing all kinds of shots. Another rolled around the corner of the outbuilding, putting it between him and the woods. Dan and Brown hammered him down. A burst of hot wet spray stung my face and I looked right to see Nate hunch forward into the flat green fingers of the junipers. The top of his head gleamed.

"Contact!" I screamed. I rolled to my knees and thirty yards to our right saw the faces of five men lit by the moon bouncing off the snow. My head yanked back and I dropped my gun and fell on my palms. My sight grayed and narrowed, my head went warm. Things leaped. I felt my feet jarring against the ground and all at once Dan and I were sliding behind the fallback wall, shots popping behind us.

"Where's Nate and Brown?" I leaned out and squeezed the trigger. The breech clicked. I fumbled out the magazine.

"Dead," Dan said, firing, working the bolt, firing again.

"Where's Wallace?" A bullet slammed into the wall by my shoulder, spitting flakes of stone.

"What happened to Wallace?"

"What?" Dan turned on me with his brows drawn up and his mouth half open like he'd just smelled something dead. "Your neck," he said. I groped for my throat with the remaining half of my left hand and felt a finger fall into a dry, deep hole in the fleshy part of my neck, just to the left of my windpipe. "Weeping Christ," Dan said.

"What is it?"

"We need to find the doctor."

"I'm not even bleeding," I said. "We have to go back for Wallace."

"Wallace is fine." Dan's face was white as an egg. He swung around the wall and emptied his clip at the buildings we'd abandoned before everything had gone gray. I fired too, and then we were running again, and I wondered where everyone had gone.

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"You awake?" Dan said from the far side of the basement. I was lying on a pile of clothes and blankets and had been watching him stare at me for a minute or five.

"Yes."

"Sorry. Couldn't tell."

I couldn't remember yesterday. When I tried it was like having a snowball fight with your bare hands and then trying to pull a nickel from a pocketful of change—I couldn't even tell what I was touching. I had the sense yesterday hadn't been the shootout above the football field, not yesterday or the day before. More than that I couldn't say, except the snow on the ground looked pretty much the same, so it couldn't be more than a week ago, either.

"There's another one tonight." Dan pushed his palms against his eyes, speaking to the floor.

"Okay." I stared at him until he met my eyes. I hadn't asked him very long ago, I saw. His eyes had that hunted look, bright and distant and always sliding over me when he thought I wasn't looking. I swallowed the urge to ask about Wallace again. "Just us?"

"We're covering another truckload. Once they're out of town it's just us on the way back."

"Okay." I had a hole straight through my neck and a bullet lodged in the back of my left thigh from the fight at the football field. I rubbed what was left of my left hand and wondered what had happened to my fingers after they'd been shot off. If a dog or a skunk hadn't eaten them, they might still be in that parking lot under all the snow. I wanted to go over there and try to dig them up. I didn't like the thought of someone picking them out of the gravel in the spring.

"Hey. Cam."

"What?" I said.

"What do you think about getting on the truck next time?"

"Oh, I don't think so."

Dan bulged his upper lip out and made a squelching sound. "Why not?"

"No, I don't think so. There's still people here."

"Pretty sure everyone who's going to leave has left. Rest don't need our help."

"But the rebels. I don't think we should go anywhere else till we've killed all the ones still here."

"Yeah."

"Don't you think so?"

Dan rolled his lip between his teeth. "How many times you been shot?"

"Four. Counting my hand." I touched each one to be sure: ribs, neck, hand, thigh. "Four."

His eyes got that bright and distant look again. "I thought you might be tired."

"You think maybe that Peeper gun numbed me up? When it finally wears off I'll just start bleeding like crazy?"

"I don't know anything about them."

"That's why we got to keep pushing back, Dan. We got to hold on till someone figures out what to do." For an instant I understood Wallace was dead and had been for a while. There'd been something I needed to tell him. I wondered if the man who'd killed him was still here in Moscow. They'd been shuffling troops, pushing south. What if some left town? What if the man who'd shot Wallace lived another forty years?

Dan got me up just before midnight and reminded me about the truck. We had three miles to walk and a lot of it was through the heart of town. Dan's breath whirled past his shoulder as we slipped down the snow-choked alleys between the dorms and frat houses. We waited in the shadow of a hedge, then hurried across the street to the sidewalks of the needle-steepled Mormon church, down the stairs into student parking, past the railroad tracks and the grain elevator me and Wallace had climbed one night after smashing an empty fifth of Petron in the parking lot and betting each other we could see the whole town from up there. We could, too, the lights lining the highway to the north and stopping dead at the Washington border on the west edge of town, and all the while small things had been crunching under our feet, like old bundles of twigs or styrofoam cups, and we'd looked down and found ourselves standing on a solid layer of sleeping pigeons.

We saw four men smoking cigarettes at a corner three blocks away, laughter carrying in the thin dry air, and had to double back for a while. We stuck to alleys and service lanes I'd only ever walked under cover of night and whiskey. Dan was shivering. We trotted to the other side of Washington Street and from there it was all houses, silent blocks and back yards unbroken by footprints, trees in the lawns and lining the streets, the only two people alive in the world. The town gave out and we walked until we came to the farmhouse with the truck. The drive and yard were empty. Dan whistled twice and two shadows with rifles slipped from the half-open door of a dark barn.

"Good to see you," one of them said, a tall blonde man with a gut.

"Any contact?" Dan said.

"Nothing." The blonde man put his hands in his pockets and bulged his cheek with his tongue. "Well."

He went into the barn and emerged followed by shivering people with glistening round eyes that locked on me then darted away. The blonde man let down the tailgate on the truck and they piled in. Their faces were dirty and red and streaked with tears from the wind and the cold. I thought I heard one of them say my name, but who did I know?

"Let's head back up," Dan said. He jerked his head at the blonde man. "Give us a ring when you're clear."

As we headed back to the road, I wondered where all those people were going. Headed east—over to Missoula? Across the Rockies? I should have asked if any of them had seen Wallace.

I breathed on my hands, but they didn't feel any warmer. Dan's cell buzzed. He whispered into it and we started for home under the wink of two thousand stars.

"Get down," I whispered, barring an arm across Dan's chest. We'd reached the edge of town and three men leaned against a garage a hundred yards off, guns glinting in the moonlight.

Dan's body went tight as a sheet of ice and I shoved him down into the shin-high snow. I settled the butt of my gun into the crease of my shoulder and found my aim as steady as the turn of the seasons. I shot and one of the men dropped, hands clutching his throat. The other two broke for a snowed-in car and I stood tall and kept my scope level and fired as the bulge of a man's capped head poked up from behind the car's hood. The last man cut loose, bullets cracking through the air, snapping through the weeds. My third shot took him through the forehead.

"What the hell," Dan choked.

"Come on." We raced through open ground until we hit the first farmhouse and stuffed ourselves under a battered yellow pickup. Headlights shot across the line of houses where the men lay dead in the snow a quarter mile behind us. The pickup hadn't been driven since the first snows and bare gravel ground under our bellies. For twenty minutes we listened to the wind, to far-off shouts, the flutter of pheasants in the pines.

"What happened to you?" Dan whispered.

"I got lucky."

"Bullshit. You should be dead."

"Maybe my fingers are keeping me alive," I laughed. "They're still under the snow somewhere."

"I tell you something and you forget it two minutes later. You get shot and don't bleed. I can't even see your breath."

"It's there." I cupped my left hand against my mouth, breath tickling the scarred and scabbed stump of palm. "What do you want from me?"

"Tell me where Wallace is."

"I don't know. Do you?" I frowned at him and he sighed so low I could barely hear it. We waited under that truck a half hour after the far-off voices went away, then weaved through the abandoned streets until we were home.

\* \* \*

When I woke up, Dan was gone.

I marked days on the wall above my bed. After the first set of five I knew he wasn't coming back. I wasn't angry. I knew Dan was breaking down. I wished he'd asked me to go on the truck with him, but I'd have just said no. They needed someone like me here.

By light I waited in windows and watched the rebels move, and by night I climbed up on roofs and waited for my shot. I forgot how many I killed. I found notches in the stock of my gun that said ten, but I thought I could remember more. On the sixth day I dangled off a roof and dropped to a crouch and two were waiting for me. They shot me through the gut and I fell down in the snow. I didn't blink when they walked up and spat on me and shot me through the ribs twice more.

Things went smeary for a while. I came to in the middle of an intersection in the middle of the night. A cigarette dangled half-smoked from my lips. A shot cracked from behind me and I turned and waited for the rifle to flash again, squinting down my sight at the dark hollow of his eye before I blacked it out. My hands and coat and pants were frozen with blood that wasn't mine. Somewhere I'd found a knife. I used that, too, burying myself in snowbanks and charging them when they walked past, cutting them down before they could call out, then doing the same when the next man came to find what had happened. I had memories of kicking in doors in broad daylight with a nine millimeter bucking in my whole right hand and the knife tied to what was left of my left, but things were spotty now, as hard to call up as memories from kindergarten.

Sometimes I imagined I heard my name shouted as I flew into a room and fired my clip empty. No one there could know me, though. All the rebels had come from the north, from out of town. Everyone I'd known had disappeared: Wallace and Dan, Brown and Nate, Adam and Kim the bartenders at the Red Letter, the couple dozen friends and friends of friends I'd come to know since I'd moved here; all the college girls I'd tried to lay, the college boys I'd envied and despised. Then one day the rebels were gone, too, gone with their trucks and their jeeps and their gear, and I walked from one end of town to the other and the only population I saw was the one printed on the city limits signs, which said here was named Moscow, like in Russia.

After the gunshots had been gone a few days, the survivors emerged from back stairs of basements or crouched on their front stoops, staring like rabbits. When I walked toward them they closed the door and I heard locks snick. In the glass of shop windows that hadn't been blown out, I looked back on a face as gray and rough as concrete, met eyes as dark and sunken as the drain of a sink.

I reached out with my left hand and touched the reflection of my missing fingers, then stood up so hard the muscles in the small of my back clenched. Wallace was gone and had been for a long time. So was whatever I'd meant to apologize for, the sin I could come this close to remembering whenever I tipped back my head and let the falling snow meet my face. It was weeks into a winter that felt like it might never end, but in the parking lot of the motel on the north end of town, fingers that had once been mine nestled in the snow and waited for a thaw. I didn't know if that would change anything, if there were rules to whatever fluke of extraterrestrial physics had kept me on my feet. I don't think I could have understood them even before my brain had been clouded by so much gray. I wondered if I should try to follow the tire tracks of the rebels on the eastbound highway. I'd never be welcome by the local survivors. They'd never see past my face.

My fingers fell away from the window. My head was as clear and bare as the unpeopled streets. I repeated my name to myself until I was certain I had it. At one time, I'd hurt one of my friends. I hoped that wherever he was, he could forgive me.

## [About the Author](#)

A former Northwesterner, New Yorker, and Idaho-guy, Ed now lives in LA's South Bay, where he writes movie reviews, short stories, and novels, most of which contain a wizard or a robot. Even the movie reviews. A sleeping puppy is currently making this hard to type.

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Email: [edwrobertson@gmail.com](mailto:edwrobertson@gmail.com)

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