



EXCERPT FROM: "[All I needed to know I learned it in kindergarten](#)", by Robert Fulghum.

The Russians are a rotten lot, immoral, aggressive, ruthless, coarse, and generally evil. They are responsible for most of the troubles in this world. They're not like us.

That's pretty much the summary of the daily news about the Russians. But sometimes something slips through the net of prejudice, some small bit of a sign that is so clean and true and real that it wedges open the rusting Iron Curtain long enough for us to see not an enemy but fellow travelers, joined to us by membership in the Fellowship of Joy-and-Pain.

See Nicolai Pestretsov. I don't know much about him. I don't know where he is now, but I'll tell you what I know.

He was a sergeant major in the Russian army, thirty-six years old. He was stationed in Angola, a long way from home. His wife had come out to visit him.

On August 24, South African military units entered Angola in an offensive against the black nationalist guerrillas taking sanctuary there. At the village of N-Giva, they encountered a group of Russian soldiers. Four were killed and the rest of the Russians fled -except for Sergeant Major Pestretsov. He was captured, as we know because the South African military report said: "Sergeant. Major Nicolai Pestretsov refused to leave the body of his slain wife, who was killed in the assault on the village."

It was as if the South Africans could not believe it, for the report repeated the information. "He went to the body of his wife and would not leave it, although she was dead."

How strange!. Why didn't he run and save his own hide? What made him go back? Is it possible that he loved her? Is it possible that he wanted to hold her in his arms one last time? Is it possible that he needed to cry and grieve? Is it possible that he felt the stupidity of war? Is it possible that he felt the injustice of fate? Is it possible that he thought of children, born or unborn? Is it possible that he didn't care what became of him now?

It's possible. We don't know. Or at least we don't know for certain. But we can guess. His actions answer.

And so he sits alone in a South African prison. Not a "Russian" or "Communist" or "soldier" or "enemy" or any of those categories. Just-a-man who cared for just-a-woman for just-a-time more than anything else.

Here's to you, Nicolai Pestretsov, wherever you may go and be, for giving powerful meaning to the promises that are the same everywhere; for dignifying that covenant that is the same in any language--"for better or for worse, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love and honor and cherish unto death, so help me God." You kept the faith; kept it bright--kept it shining. Bless you!

(*Oh, the Russians are a rotten lot, immoral, aggressive, ruthless, coarse, and generally evil. They are responsible for most of the troubles of this world. They are not like us.*) Sure.