

## *Kolyma Tales*

### *Through the Snow*

How is a road beaten down through the virgin snow? One person walks ahead, sweating, swearing, and barely moving his feet. He keeps getting stuck in the loose, deep snow. He goes far ahead, marking his path with uneven black pits. When he tires, he lies down on the snow, lights a home-made cigarette, and the tobacco smoke hangs suspended above the white, gleaming snow like a blue cloud. The man moves on, but the cloud remains hovering above the spot where he rested, for the air is motionless. Roads are always beaten down on days like these – so that the wind won't sweep away this labor of man. The man himself selects points in the snow's infinity to orient himself – a cliff, a tall tree. He steers his body through the snow in the same fashion that a helmsman steers a riverboat from one cape to another.

Five or six persons follow shoulder-to-shoulder along the narrow, wavering track of the first man. They walk beside his path but not along it. When they reach a predetermined spot, they turn back and tramp down the clean virgin snow which has not yet felt the foot of man. The road is tramped down. It can be used by people, sleighs, tractors. If they were to walk directly behind the first man, the second group would make a clearly defined but barely passable narrow path, and not a road. The first man has the hardest task, and when he is exhausted, another man from the group of five takes his place. Each of them – even the smallest and weakest – must beat down a section of virgin snow, and not simply follow in another's footsteps. Later will come tractors and horses driven by readers, instead of authors and poets.

## *On Tick*

They were playing cards on Naumov's berth in the barracks for the mine's horse-drivers. The overseer on duty never looked into that barracks, since he considered that his main duty was to keep an eye on prisoners convicted according to Article 58 of the Criminal Code – political prisoners. In a word, the horse-drivers' barracks was the safest place to be, and every night the criminal element in the camp gathered there to play cards.

In a corner of the barracks on the lower cots quilts of various colors were spread. To the corner post was wired a burning *kolymka* – a home-made lamp that worked on gas fumes. Three or four open-ended copper tubes were soldered to the lid of a tin can. It was a very simple device. When hot coals were placed on the lid, the gas heated up and fumes rose along the pipes, burning at the pipe ends when lit by a match.

On the blankets lay a dirty feather pillow and on either side of it the players sat, their legs tucked under them. A new deck of cards lay on the pillow. These were not ordinary cards, but a home-made prison deck made with amazing deftness by the local wizards. They needed only paper, a piece of bread (chewed and pressed through a rag, it produced starch to glue the sheets together), an indelible pencil stub, and a knife (to cut stencils for the card suits and the cards themselves).

Today's cards were cut from a book by Victor Hugo; someone had forgotten the book the day before in the office. It had heavy thick paper, so there was no need to glue sheets together.

A dirty hand with the slender white fingers of a non-working man was patting the deck on the pillow. The nail of the little finger was of unusual length – a fashion among the criminals just like their gold, that is, bronze crowns put on completely healthy teeth. As for

the fingernails, nail polish would unquestionably have become popular in the 'criminal world' if it were possible to obtain polish in prison circumstances.

The owner of the deck was running his left hand through his sticky, dirty, light-colored hair, which was meticulously cut with a square back. Everything in his face – the low unwrinkled forehead, yellow bushy brows, and pursed lips – provided him with the impression valued most in a thief: inconspicuousness. He had the kind of face no one remembered. One had but to glance at him to forget his every feature and not recognize him at the next meeting. This was Seva, a famous expert on such classic card games as *Terz*, *Stoss*, and *Bura*, the inspired interpreter of a thousand card rules to be rigidly followed. It was said of Seva that he was a 'great performer', that is, he could demonstrate the dexterity of a card-sharp. Of course, he was a card-sharp, since an honest thief's game is a game of deceit: watch your partner – that's your right; know how to cheat; know how to talk your way out of a dubious loss.

They always played in pairs – one on one. None of the experts would lower himself to participate in group games such as Twenty-One. Seva's partner was Naumov, the brigade leader of the horse-drivers. He was older than his partner (but then, just how old was Seva? Twenty? Thirty? Forty?). Naumov had black hair and deep-set black eyes that gave the impression of a martyr. If I hadn't known he was a railroad thief from the Kuban region I would have taken him for a member of the religious sect *God Knows* that had been cropping up for decades in the camps. This impression was deepened by the lead cross that hung from a cord around Naumov's neck – the collar of his shirt was unbuttoned. Nothing blasphemous was intended in the cross. At the time all the thieves wore aluminum crosses around their necks; it was a kind of symbol, like a tattoo.

In the twenties the thieves wore trade-school caps; still earlier, the military officer's cap was in fashion. In the forties, during the winter, they wore peakless leather caps, folded down the tops of their felt boots, and wore a cross around the neck. The cross was

usually smooth but if an artist was around, he was forced to use a needle to paint it with the most diverse subjects: a heart, cards, a crucifixion, a naked woman... Naumov's cross was smooth. It hung on his bare chest, partially blocking the tattoo which was a quote from Esenin, the only poet the 'criminal world' recognized:

So few my roads,  
So many the mistakes.

'What are you playing for?' Seva spat out his question with boundless contempt; this was considered *bon ton* at the beginning of a game.

'These duds.' Naumov tapped his own shoulders.

'Five hundred,' Seva appraised Naumov's jacket and pants.

In response there erupted an elaborate stream of obscenities intended to convince the opponent of the much greater worth of the object. The viewers surrounding the players patiently waited for the end of this traditional overture. Seva was not one to fall behind and he swore even more bitterly, trying to lower the price. For his part Seva was 'playing' a few second-hand pullovers. After the pullovers had been appraised and cast on the blanket, Seva shuffled the cards.

I was sawing wood for Naumov's barracks together with Garkunov, a former textile engineer. This was night work – after the normal work in the mines. We had to chop and saw enough wood for the day. We came to the horse-drivers' barracks immediately after supper; it was warmer here than in our barracks. When we finished, Naumov's orderly gave us some bread and poured cold soup into our pots. It was the leftovers of the single invariable dish of the cafeteria, called 'Ukrainian dumplings' on the menu. We would always sit on the floor somewhere in the corner and quickly eat our wages. We ate in absolute darkness; the barracks' *kolymkas* lit the card-playing area. At the moment we were watching Seva and Naumov.

Naumov lost his 'duds'. The pants and jacket lay next to Seva on the blanket. The pillow was being played for. Seva's fingernail described elaborate patterns in the air. The cards would disappear in

his palm and then appear again. Naumov was wearing an undershirt; his satin Russian blouse departed after the pants. Someone's helpful hands threw a padded jacket over his shoulders, but he cast it off with a jerky movement. Suddenly everyone fell silent. Seva was scratching the pillow with his nail.

'I'll play the blanket,' said Naumov hoarsely.

'Two hundred,' Seva responded indifferently.

'A thousand, you bitch!' Naumov shouted.

'For what? It's nothing! Junk!' Seva exclaimed. 'But for you I'll play it at three hundred.'

The game continued. According to the rules it could not be ended until one of the partners had nothing left with which to 'answer'.

'I'll play the felt boots!'

'Nothing doing,' said Seva firmly. 'I don't play for regulation-issue rags.'

A Ukrainian towel embroidered with roosters and appraised at a few rubles was played and then a cigarette case with a pressed profile of Gogol. Everything transferred to Seva. The dark skin of Naumov's cheeks reddened.

'On tick,' he said obsequiously.

'That's all I need,' Seva responded in a lively fashion and stretched his hand back over his shoulder; immediately a lit, home-made cigarette was put into it. Seva inhaled deeply and coughed.

'What am I supposed to do with your "tick"? No new prisoners are coming in; where can you get anything? From the guards?'

The 'rules' didn't oblige Seva to play 'on tick', that is, on credit, but Seva didn't want to offend Naumov by depriving him of his last chance to recoup his losses.

'One hundred,' he said slowly. 'We'll play for an hour.'

'Give me a card.' Naumov adjusted his cross and sat down. He won back the blanket, pillow, and pants. Then he lost everything again.

‘We need some *chifir*,’ said Seva, putting the things he had won into a large plywood suitcase. ‘I’ll wait.’

‘Make some, guys,’ said Naumov. This was an amazing northern drink; several ounces of tea leaves went into one mug – the drink was extremely bitter, drunk in swallows with a snack of salted fish. It totally eliminated any drowsiness and therefore was favored by thieves and long-distance truck drivers in the north.

Naumov’s heavy black gaze roamed over the surrounding company. His hair was tangled. His gaze fell upon me and stopped. Some thought flashed over his face.

‘Come here.’

I came out into the light.

‘Take off the coat.’

It was clear what he had in mind, and everyone watched with interest.

Under the quilted jacket I wore only the regulation undershirt. I’d been issued a field shirt two years earlier, but it had long since rotted away. I got dressed.

‘Now you,’ said Naumov, pointing at Garkunov. Garkunov took off his quilted jacket. His face was white. Beneath the dirty undershirt was a wool sweater. It was the last package from his wife before he was sent off to Siberia, and I knew how Garkunov treasured it. In the bathhouse he would wash the sweater and then dry it on his own body; he never let it out of his hands for a minute, because it would have been stolen immediately.

‘Let’s have it,’ said Naumov.

‘I won’t take it off,’ said Garkunov hoarsely. ‘You’ll have to take the skin with...’

They rushed at him, knocking him down.

‘He’s biting,’ someone shouted.

Garkunov slowly got up from the floor, wiping the blood from his face with his sleeve. Immediately Sasha, Naumov’s orderly, the same Sasha who had just poured us soup for sawing wood, stooped down

and jerked something from the top of his boot. Then he stretched out his hand to Garkunov, and Garkunov sobbed and started to lean over on his side.

‘Couldn’t we get along without that?’ shouted Seva.

In the flickering light of the gasoline lamp, Garkunov’s face became gray.

Sasha stretched out the dead man’s arms, tore off his undershirt, and pulled the sweater over his head. The sweater was red, and the blood on it was hardly noticeable. Seva folded the sweater into the plywood suitcase – carefully, so as not to get the blood on his fingers. The game was over. I went back to my barracks. Now I had to find a new partner to cut wood with.

## *Carpenters*

For two days the white fog was so thick a man couldn't be seen two paces away. But then there wasn't much opportunity to take long walks alone. Somehow you could guess the direction of the mess hall, the hospital, the guardhouse – those few points we had to be able to find. That same sense of direction that animals possess perfectly also awakens in man under the right conditions.

The men were not shown the thermometer, but that wasn't necessary since they had to work in any weather. Besides, longtime residents of Kolyma could determine the weather precisely even without a thermometer: if there was frosty fog, that meant the temperature outside was forty degrees below zero; if you exhaled easily but in a rasping fashion, it was fifty degrees below zero; if there was a rasping and it was difficult to breathe, it was sixty degrees below; after sixty degrees below zero, spit froze in mid-air. Spit had been freezing in mid-air for two weeks.

Potashnikov woke each morning with the hope that the cold had let up during the night. He knew from last winter's experience that no matter how low the temperature was, a sharp change was necessary for a feeling of warmth. If the frost were to weaken its grip even to forty or fifty degrees below zero, it would be warm for two days, and there was no sense in planning more than two days ahead.

But the cold kept up, and Potashnikov knew he couldn't hold out any longer. Breakfast sustained his strength for no more than an hour of work, and then exhaustion ensued. Frost penetrated the body to the 'marrow of the bone' – the phrase was no metaphor. A man could wave his pick or shovel, jump up and down so as not to freeze – till dinner. Dinner was hot – a thin broth and two spoons of kasha that restored one's strength only a little but nevertheless



provided some warmth. And then there was strength to work for an hour, and after that Potashnikov again felt himself in the grip of the cold. The day would finally come to a close, and after supper all the workers would take their bread back to the barracks, where they would eat it, washing it down with a mug of hot water. Not a single man would eat his bread in the mess hall with his soup. After that Potashnikov would go to sleep.

He slept, of course, on one of the upper berths, because the lower ones were like an ice cellar. Everyone who had a lower berth would stand half the night at the stove, taking turns with his neighbors in embracing it; the stove retained a slight remnant of warmth. There was never enough firewood, because to go for it meant a four-kilometer walk after work and everyone avoided the task. The upper berths were warmer, but even so everyone slept in his working clothes – hats, padded coats, pea jackets, felt pants. Even with the extra warmth, by the morning a man's hair would be frozen to the pillow.

Potashnikov felt his strength leaving him every day. A thirty-year-old man, he had difficulty in climbing on to an upper berth and even in getting down from it. His neighbor had died yesterday. The man simply didn't wake up, and no one asked for the cause of death, as if there were only one cause that everyone knew. The orderly was happy that the man died in the morning, and not in the evening, since the orderly got the dead man's ration for the day. Everyone realized this, and Potashnikov screwed up his courage to approach the orderly.

'Break off a piece of the crust,' he asked, but the orderly cursed him as only a man whose weakness lent him strength could. Potashnikov fell silent and walked away.

He had to take some action, think of something with his weakened mind. Either that or die. Potashnikov had no fear of death, but he couldn't rid himself of a passionate secret desire, a last stubbornness – to live. He didn't want to die here in the frost under the boots of the guards, in the barracks with its swearing, dirt, and total indifference written on every face. He bore no grudge for

people's indifference, for he had long since comprehended the source of that spiritual dullness. The same frost that transformed a man's spit into ice in mid-air also penetrated the soul. If bones could freeze, then the brain could also be dulled and the soul could freeze over. And the soul shuddered and froze – perhaps to remain frozen for ever. Potashnikov had lost everything except the desire to survive, to endure the cold and remain alive.

Having gulped down his bowl of warm soup, Potashnikov was barely able to drag himself to the work area. The work gang stood at attention before beginning work, and a fat red-faced man in a deerskin hat and a white leather coat walked up and down the rows in Yakut deerskin boots. He peered into their exhausted dirty faces. The gang foreman walked up and respectfully spoke to the man in the deerskin hat.

'I really haven't got anyone like that, Alexander Yevgenievich. You'll have to try Sobolev and the petty criminal element. These are all intellectuals, Alexander Yevgenievich. They're a pain in the neck.'

The man in the deerskin hat stopped looking over the men and turned to the gang foreman.

'The foremen don't know their people, they don't want to know, they don't want to help us,' he said hoarsely.

'Have it your way, Alexander Yevgenievich.'

'I'll show you. What's your name?'

'My name's Ivanov, Alexander Yevgenievich.'

'Just watch. Hey, guys, attention!' The man in the deerskin hat walked up to the work gang. 'The camp administration needs carpenters to make boxes to haul dirt.'

Everyone was silent.

'You see, Alexander Yevgenievich?' the foreman whispered.

Potashnikov suddenly heard his own voice.

'I'm a carpenter.' And he stepped forward. Another man stepped forward on his right. Potashnikov knew him; it was Grigoriev.

‘Well,’ said the man in the deerskin hat, turning to the foreman, ‘are you an incompetent asshole or not? OK, fellows, follow me.’

Potashnikov and Grigoriev stumbled after the man in the deerskin hat. He stopped.

‘At this pace,’ he said hoarsely, ‘we won’t make it even by dinnertime. Here’s what. I’ll go ahead and you go to the shop and ask for the foreman, Sergeev. You know where the carpentry shop is?’

‘We know, we know,’ Grigoriev said in a loud voice. ‘Please, give us a smoke.’

‘I think I’ve heard that request before,’ the man in the deerskin hat muttered and pulled out two cigarettes without removing the pack from his pocket.

Potashnikov walked ahead and thought frantically. Today he would be in the warmth of the carpentry shop. He’d sharpen the axe and make a handle. And sharpen the saw. No sense hurrying. He could kill time till dinner signing out the tools and finding the quartermaster. By evening they’d realize he didn’t know how to make an axe handle or sharpen a saw, and they’d kick him out. Tomorrow he’d have to return to the work gang. But today he’d be warm. Maybe he could remain a carpenter tomorrow and the day after tomorrow – if Grigoriev was a carpenter. He’d be Grigoriev’s helper. Winter was nearly over. Somehow he’d survive the short summer.

Potashnikov stopped and waited for Grigoriev.

‘Do you know how... to be a carpenter?’ he asked, holding his breath in sudden hope.

‘Well, you see,’ said Grigoriev cheerfully, ‘I was a graduate student at the Moscow Philological Institute. I don’t see why anyone with a higher education, especially one in the humanities, can’t sharpen an axe and set the teeth on a saw. Particularly if he has to do it next to a hot stove.’

‘That means you can’t do it either...’

‘It doesn’t mean anything. We’ll fool them for two days, and what do you care what happens after that?’

‘We’ll fool them for one day, and tomorrow we’ll be back in the work gang...’

Together the two of them barely managed to open the frozen door. In the middle of the carpentry shop stood a red-hot cast-iron stove; five carpenters were working without coats and hats at their benches. The new arrivals knelt before the stove’s open door as if it were the god of fire, one of man’s first gods. They threw down their mittens and stretched their hands toward the warmth but were not able to feel it immediately since their hands were numb. In a minute Grigoriev and Potashnikov knelt, took off their hats, and unbuttoned their padded jackets.

‘What are you doing here?’ one of the carpenters asked with hostility.

‘We’re carpenters. We’re going to work here,’ Grigoriev said.

‘Alexander Yevgenievich said so,’ Potashnikov added hurriedly.

‘That means you’re the ones the foreman told us to give axes to?’ asked Arishtrem, an older man in charge of tools who was planing shovel handles in the corner.

‘That’s us, that’s us...’

‘Here they are,’ Arishtrem said, looking them over sceptically. ‘Two axes, a saw, and a tooth-setter. You’ll return the tooth-setter later. Here’s my axe; make yourself a handle with it.’

Arishtrem smiled.

‘You’ll have to do thirty handles a day,’ he said.

Grigoriev took the block of wood from Arishtrem’s hands and began to hack away at it. The dinner horn sounded, but Arishtrem kept staring silently at Grigoriev’s work.

‘Now you,’ he said to Potashnikov.

Potashnikov put the log on the stump, took the axe from Grigoriev’s hands, and began to trim the piece.

The carpenters had all left for dinner, and there was no one left in the shop except the three men.

‘Take my two axe handles,’ Arishtrem said, handing the two ready pieces to Grigoriev, ‘and mount the heads. Sharpen the saw. You can stay warm at the stove today and tomorrow. After that, go back where you came from. Here’s a piece of bread for dinner.’

They stayed warm at the stove those two days, and the following day it was only twenty degrees below zero. Winter was over.

## *Shock Therapy*

During one blissful period in his life Merzlakov had worked as a stable-hand and used a home-made huller – a large tin can with a perforated bottom – to turn oats intended for the horses into human food. When boiled, the bitter mixture could satisfy hunger. Large workhorses from the mainland were given twice as much oats as the stocky, shaggy Yakut horses, although all the horses were worked an equally small amount of time. Enough oats were dumped in the trough of the monstrous Percheron, Thunder, to feed five Yakut horses. This was the practice everywhere, and it struck Merzlakov as being only fair. What he could not understand was the camp's rationing system for people. The mysterious charts of proteins, fats, vitamins, and calories intended for the convicts' table did not take a person's weight into consideration. If human beings were to be equated with livestock, then one ought to be more consistent and not hold to some arithmetical average invented by the office. This terrible 'mean' benefited only the lightweight convicts who, in fact, survived longer than the others. The enormous Merzlakov – a sort of human analogue to the Percheron, Thunder – felt only a greater gnawing hunger from the three spoons of porridge given out for breakfast. A member of a work gang had no way of supplementing his food supply, and furthermore, all the most important foodstuffs – butter, sugar, meat – never made it to the camp kettle in the quantities provided for by the instructions.

Merzlakov watched the larger men die first – whether or not they were accustomed to heavy labor. A scrawny intellectual lasted longer than some country giant, even when the latter had formerly been a manual laborer, if the two were fed on an equal basis in accordance with the camp ration. Not calculated for large men, the basic nourishment could not be essentially improved even by food bonuses for heightened productivity. To eat better, one had to work

better. But to work better one had to eat better. Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were always the first to die – a phenomenon that the doctors always explained away by claiming that peoples of the Baltic states were weaker than Russians. True, their normal way of life was more dissimilar to that of the camps than was the world of the Russian peasant, and it was more difficult for them. The primary reason, however, was quite different: it wasn't that they possessed less endurance, but that they were physically bigger than the Russians.

About a year and a half earlier, Merzlakov had arrived as a newcomer at the camp. In a state of collapse from scurvy, he had been allowed to work as a stand-in orderly in the local clinic. There he learned that medical dosages were determined according to the patient's weight. New medicines were tested on rabbits, mice, or guinea pigs, and human dosages were then calculated according to body weight. Children's dosages were smaller than adult dosages.

The camp food ration, however, had no relation to the weight of the human body, and it was precisely this improperly resolved question that amazed and disturbed Merzlakov. But before he completely lost his strength, he miraculously managed to get a job as a stable-hand so he could steal oats from the horses to stuff his own stomach. Merzlakov was already counting on surviving the winter. Perhaps something new would turn up in the spring. But it didn't work out that way. The stable manager was fired for drunkenness and the senior groom – one of those who had taught Merzlakov how to make a huller – took his place. The senior groom had himself stolen no small amount of oats in his day, and he knew exactly how it was done. Wanting to impress the administration and no longer in need of oatmeal for himself, he personally smashed all the hullers. The stable hands began to fry or boil oats and eat them unhulled, no longer making any distinction between their own stomachs and that of a horse. The new manager reported this, and several stable hands, including Merzlakov, were put in solitary for stealing oats. From there they were dismissed from the stable and returned to their former jobs – in the general work gang.

In the general work gang Merzlakov soon realized that death was near. He staggered under the weight of the logs he had to carry. The foreman, who had taken a dislike to this husky man, forced Merzlakov to carry the thick end of the log every time. At one point Merzlakov fell and, unable to get up from the snow, in a moment of decision refused to carry the damn log any farther. It was already late and dark. The guards were hurrying to their political indoctrination session; the workers wanted to return to the barracks, to food; and the foreman was late for a battle at cards. Merzlakov was the cause of the entire delay, and he was punished. At first his comrades beat him, then the foreman beat him, then the guards. The log remained lying in the snow; instead of the log, they carried in Merzlakov. He was freed from work and lay on his berth. His back ached. The paramedic rubbed it with machine grease since there were no rubbing compounds in the first-aid room.

Merzlakov kept waiting, half bent over and insistently complaining of pains in the small of the back. The pain had long since disappeared, the broken rib quickly healed, and Merzlakov was attempting at any price to save himself from being signed out to go back to work. And they didn't sign him out. At one point they dressed him, put him on a stretcher, loaded him into the back of a truck, and transferred him together with some other patients to the regional hospital. There was no X-ray machine there, and it was time to think things over seriously. Merzlakov did precisely that. For several months he lay bent in two and was finally transferred to a central hospital which, of course, had an X-ray machine. There Merzlakov was placed in the surgical division. In the traumatological ward the patients in their simplicity referred to the ward as the 'dramatological' ward, not even realizing the bitterness of the pun.

'This one,' said the surgeon, pointing to Merzlakov's chart, 'we're transferring to you, Peter Ivanovich. There's nothing we can do for him in surgery.'



‘But you write in your diagnosis – “ankylosis resulting from a trauma of the spine”. What am I supposed to do with him?’ asked the neuropathologist.

‘Well, yes, ankylosis, of course. What else can I write? After beatings, even worse things turn up. I remember there was an incident at the Sery Mine. The foreman beat one of the men...’

‘I haven’t got time to listen to your incidents, Seryozha. I ask you, why are you transferring him to me?’

‘It’s all written down. He has to be examined before we can make up the papers. You poke him with needles for a while, we do the papers, and we put him on the boat. Let him be a free man.’

‘But you did X-rays? You should be able to see any problems without needles.’

‘We did X-rays. Take a look.’ The surgeon held the dark film negative up to a gauze curtain. ‘The devil himself couldn’t find anything in that picture. And that kind of smear is all your X-ray technicians will ever produce until we get regular current.’

‘What a mess,’ said Peter Ivanovich. ‘OK, let’s let it go at that.’ And he signed his name to the history of the illness, giving his consent to transfer Merzlakov to his own ward.

The surgical ward was noisy and confusing. The northern mines were serious business, and the ward was filled with cases of frostbite, sprains, broken bones, burns. Some of the patients lay on the ward floor and in the corridors where one totally exhausted young surgeon with four assistants could only manage three or four hours of sleep a day and had no time to examine Merzlakov carefully. Merzlakov knew that the real investigation would begin in the neuropathological ward.

His entire despairing convict will was concentrated on one thing: not to straighten out. And he did not straighten out, much as he wanted to – even for a moment. He remembered the gold-mine; the cold that left him breathless with pain; the frozen, slippery stones, shiny with frost; the soup he slurped without any spoon; the rifle butts of the guards and the boots of the foremen. And he found

within himself the strength not to straighten out. Already it was easier than it had been the first few weeks. Afraid to straighten out in his sleep, he slept little, knowing that all the attendants had orders to keep an eye on him and unmask his duplicity. And after such an unmasking he would be sent to a 'penal mine'. What must such a penal mine be like, if even an ordinary one left Merzlov with such terrible memories?

On the day after his transfer, Merzlov was taken to the doctor. The head doctor asked briefly about the origin of the illness and shook his head in sympathy. He remarked in passing that even healthy muscles forced into an unnatural position for many months could become accustomed to the position and a man could make himself an invalid. Then Peter Ivanovich took over the examination. Merzlov responded at random to needle pricks, pressures, and taps with a rubber hammer.

Peter Ivanovich spent more than half of his time exposing fakers. He, of course, understood the reasons for their conduct. Peter Ivanovich had himself recently been a prisoner, and he was not surprised by the childish stubbornness of the fakers or the primitiveness of their tricks. Peter Ivanovich, a former associate professor at a Siberian medical institute, had laid his own scientific career to rest in those same snows in which the convicts were saving their lives by deceiving him. It was not that he lacked pity for people, but he was more of a doctor than a human being; first and foremost he was a specialist. He was proud that a year of hard labor had not beaten the doctor, the specialist out of him. He understood his task of exposing cheaters – not from any lofty, socio-governmental point of view and not from the viewpoint of morality. Rather, he saw in this activity a worthy application of his knowledge, his psychological ability to set traps, into which hungry, half-insane people were to fall for the greater glory of science. In this battle of doctor and faker, the doctor had all the advantages – thousands of clever drugs, hundreds of textbooks, a wealth of equipment, aid from the guards, and the enormous experience of a specialist. The patient could count only on his own horror before

that world from which he had come and to which he feared to return. It was precisely this horror that lent him the strength for the struggle. In exposing any faker, Peter Ivanovich experienced a deep satisfaction. He regarded it as testimony from life that he was a good doctor who had not yet lost his qualifications but, on the contrary, had sharpened them, who could still 'do it'.

'These surgeons are fools,' he thought, lighting up a cigarette after Merzlakov had left. 'They either don't know or have forgotten topographic anatomy, and they never did know reflexes. They get along with X-rays alone, and without X-rays they can't even diagnose a simple fracture. And the bullshit they throw around!' It was crystal clear to Peter Ivanovich that Merzlakov was a faker. 'Let him stay for a week. We'll get all the tests worked up to make sure the formalities have been observed and glue all those scraps of paper into the history of the illness.' Peter Ivanovich smiled in anticipation of the theatrical effect of the new exposé. In a week a new group of patients would be shipped back to the mainland. The reports were compiled right here in the ward, and the chairman of the board of medical commissioners would arrive to examine personally the patients prepared by the hospital for departure. His role amounted to examining the documents and checking that the formalities had been observed; an individual examination of the patient took thirty seconds.

'My lists,' said the surgeon, 'contain a certain Merzlakov. The guards broke his back a year ago. I want to send him home. He was recently transferred to Neuropathology. The papers for his departure are ready.'

The chairman of the commission turned to the neuropathologist.

'Bring in Merzlakov,' said Peter Ivanovich.

The bent-over Merzlakov was led in; the chairman glanced at him.

'What a gorilla,' he said. 'But I guess there's no reason to keep that kind around.' Pen in hand, he reached for the lists.

‘I won’t give my signature,’ said Peter Ivanovich in a clear, loud voice. ‘He’s a faker, and tomorrow I will have the honor to prove that to both you and the surgeon.’

‘Let’s set him aside then,’ said the chairman indifferently, putting his pen down. ‘And, in general, let’s wrap things up. It’s already getting late.’

‘He’s a faker, Seryozha,’ said Peter Ivanovich, taking the surgeon by the arm as they were leaving the ward.

The surgeon withdrew his arm.

‘Maybe,’ he said with a disgusted frown. ‘Good luck in exposing him. I hope you get your kicks out of it.’

The next day Peter Ivanovich gave a detailed report on Merzlakov to the head of the hospital at a meeting.

‘I think,’ he said in conclusion, ‘we’ll expose Merzlakov in two stages. The first will be the Rausch narcosis that you forgot, Seryozha.’ Triumphantly, he turned to the surgeon. ‘That should have been done right away. And if the Rausch doesn’t produce any results, then...’ Peter Ivanovich spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. ‘Then we’ll have to try shock therapy. I assure you, that can be very interesting.’

‘Isn’t that going too far?’ Alexandra Sergeevna asked. She was a heavy woman who had recently arrived from the mainland. Here she ran the tubercular ward – the largest ward in the hospital.

‘Not for that son of a bitch,’ the head of the hospital answered.

‘Let’s wait and see what kind of results we get from the Rausch,’ Peter Ivanovich inserted in a conciliatory fashion.

Rausch narcosis consisted of a stunning dose of ether for a short-term effect. The patient would be knocked out for fifteen or twenty minutes, giving the surgeon time to set a dislocation, amputate a finger, or open a painful abscess.

The hospital bigwigs, dressed in white gowns, surrounded the operating table at the dressing station where the obedient, stooped-over Merzlakov was brought. The attendants reached for the cotton strips normally used to tie patients to the operating table.

‘No, no,’ shouted Peter Ivanovich. ‘That’s totally unnecessary.’

Merzlakov’s face turned upward, and the surgeon placed the anesthetic mask over it, holding a bottle of ether in his other hand.

‘Let’s begin, Seryozha!’

The ether began to drip.

‘Deeper, breathe deeper, Merzlakov. Count out loud.’

‘Twenty-six, twenty-seven,’ Merzlakov counted in a lazy voice, and, suddenly breaking off his count, started to mutter something fragmented, incomprehensible, and sprinkled with obscenities.

Peter Ivanovich held in his hand the left hand of Merzlakov. In a few minutes the hand fell limp. Peter Ivanovich dropped it, and the hand fell softly on to the edge of the table, as if dead. Peter Ivanovich slowly and triumphantly straightened out the body of Merzlakov. Everyone gasped with amazement.

‘Now tie him down,’ said Peter Ivanovich to the attendants.

Merzlakov opened his eyes and saw the hairy fist of the hospital director.

‘You slime,’ he hissed. ‘Now you’ll get a new trial.’

‘Good going, Peter Ivanovich, good going!’ the chairman of the commission kept repeating, all the while slapping the neuropathologist on the shoulder. ‘And to think that just yesterday I was going to let him go!’

‘Untie him,’ Peter Ivanovich commanded. ‘Get down from that table.’

Still not completely aware of his surroundings, Merzlakov felt a throbbing in his temples and the sickeningly sweet taste of ether in his mouth. He still didn’t understand if he was asleep or awake, but perhaps he had frequently had such dreams in the past.

‘To hell with all of you!’ he shouted unexpectedly and bent over as before. Broad-shouldered, bony, almost touching the floor with his long, meaty fingers, Merzlakov really looked like a gorilla as he left the dressing station. The orderlies reported to Peter Ivanovich

that patient Merzlakov was lying on his bed in his usual pose. The doctor ordered him to be brought to his office.

‘You’ve been exposed, Merzlakov,’ the neuropathologist said. ‘But I put in a good word for you to the head of the hospital. You won’t be retried or sent to a penal mine. You’ll just have to check out of the hospital and return to your previous mine – to your old job. You’re a real hero, brother. Made us look like idiots for a whole year.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ the gorilla said without raising his eyes from the floor.

‘What do you mean, you don’t know? We just straightened you out!’

‘Nobody straightened me out.’

‘OK, friend,’ the neuropathologist said. ‘Have it your own way. I wanted to help you out. Just wait. In a week you’ll be begging to check out.’

‘Who knows what’ll happen in a week,’ Merzlakov said quietly. How could he explain to the doctor that an extra week, an extra day, even an extra hour spent somewhere other than the mine was his concept of happiness. If the doctor couldn’t understand that himself, how could he explain it to him? Merzlakov stared silently at the floor.

Merzlakov was led away; Peter Ivanovich went to talk to the head of the hospital.

‘We can handle this tomorrow, and not next week,’ the head of the hospital said upon hearing Peter Ivanovich’s suggestion.

‘No, I promised him a week,’ Peter Ivanovich said. ‘The hospital won’t collapse.’

‘OK,’ the head of the hospital said. ‘We can handle it next week. But be sure to send for me when you do. Will you tie him down?’

‘We can’t,’ the neuropathologist said. ‘He could dislocate an arm or a leg. He’ll have to be held down.’ Merzlakov’s case history in his hand, the neuropathologist wrote ‘shock therapy’ in the treatment column and inserted the date.

Shock therapy consisted of an injection of camphor oil directly into the patient's bloodstream. The dose was several times that used in hypodermic injections for seriously ill coronary patients. It produced a sudden seizure similar to seizures of violent insanity or epilepsy. The effect of the camphor was a radical heightening of muscle activity and motor ability. Muscle strain was increased incredibly, and the strength of the unconscious patient was ten times that of normal.

Several days passed, and Merzlakov had no intention of voluntarily straightening out. The morning of the date scheduled in the case history arrived, and Merzlakov was brought to Peter Ivanovich. In the north any sort of amusement is treasured, and the doctor's office was packed. Eight husky orderlies were lined up along the wall. In the middle of the office was a couch.

'We'll do it right here,' Peter Ivanovich said, getting up from behind the desk. 'No sense going to surgical ward. By the way, where is Sergei Fyodorovich?'

'He can't come,' Anna Ivanovna, the physician on duty, said. 'He said he was busy.'

'Busy, busy,' Peter Ivanovich repeated. 'He ought to be here to see how I do his job for him.'

The surgeon's assistant rolled up Merzlakov's sleeve and smeared iodine on Merzlakov's arm. Holding the syringe in his right hand, the assistant inserted the needle into a vein next to the elbow. Dark blood spurted from the needle into the syringe. With a soft movement of the thumb the assistant depressed the plunger, and the yellow solution began to enter the vein.

'Pump it in all at once,' Peter Ivanovich said, 'and stand back right away. You,' he said to the orderlies, 'hold him down.'

Merzlakov's enormous body shuddered and began to thrash about even as the orderlies took hold of him. He wheezed, struggled, kicked, but the orderlies held him firmly and he slowly began to calm down.

‘A tiger, you could hold a tiger that way,’ Peter Ivanovich shouted in near ecstasy. ‘That’s the way they catch tigers in the Zabaikal region.’ He turned to the head of the hospital. ‘Do you remember the end of Gogol’s novel, *Taras Bulba*? “Thirty men held his arms and legs.” This gorilla is bigger than Bulba, and just eight men can handle him.’

‘Right,’ the head of the hospital said. He didn’t remember the Gogol passage, but he definitely enjoyed seeing the shock therapy.

While making rounds the next morning Peter Ivanovich stopped at Merzlakov’s bed.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘What’s your decision?’

‘I’m ready to check out,’ Merzlakov answered.



## *Major Pugachov's Last Battle*

A lot of time must have passed between the beginning and end of these events, for the human experience acquired in the far north is so great that months are considered equivalent to years. Even the state recognizes this by increasing salaries and fringe benefits to workers of the north. It is a land of hopes and therefore of rumors, guesses, suppositions, and hypothesizing. In the north any event is encrusted with rumor more quickly than a local official's emergency report about it can reach the 'higher spheres'.

It was rumored that when a party boss on an inspection tour described the camp's cultural activities as lame on both feet, the 'activities director', Major Pugachov, said to the guest:

'Don't let that bother you, sir, we're preparing a concert that all Kolyma will talk about.'

We could begin the story straightaway with the report of Braude, a surgeon sent by the central hospital to the region of military activities. We could begin with the letter of Yashka Kuchen, a convict orderly who was a patient in the hospital. Kuchen wrote the letter with his left hand, since his right shoulder had been shot clean through by a rifle-bullet.

Or we could begin with the story of Dr Potalina who saw nothing, heard nothing, and was gone when all the unusual events took place. It was precisely her absence that the prosecutor classified as a 'false alibi', criminal inaction, or whatever the term may be in legal jargon.

The arrests of the thirties were arrests of random victims on the false and terrifying theory of a heightened class struggle accompanying the strengthening of socialism. The professors, union officials, soldiers, and workers who filled the prisons to overflowing at that period had nothing to defend themselves with except,

perhaps, personal honesty and naïveté – precisely those qualities that lightened rather than hindered the punitive work of ‘justice’ of the day. The absence of any unifying idea undermined the moral resistance of the prisoners to an unusual degree. They were neither enemies of the government nor state criminals, and they died, not even understanding why they had to die. Their self-esteem and bitterness had no point of support. Separated, they perished in the white Kolyma desert from hunger, cold, work, beatings, and diseases. They immediately learned not to defend or support each other. This was precisely the goal of the authorities. The souls of those who remained alive were utterly corrupted, and their bodies did not possess the qualities necessary for physical labor.

After the war, ship after ship delivered their replacements – former Soviet citizens who were ‘repatriated’ directly to the far north-east.

Among them were many people with different experiences and habits acquired during the war, courageous people who knew how to take chances and who believed only in the gun. There were officers and soldiers, fliers and scouts...

Accustomed to the angelic patience and slavish submissiveness of the ‘Trotskyites’, the camp administration was not in the least concerned and expected nothing new.

New arrivals asked the surviving ‘aborigines’:

‘Why do you eat your soup and kasha in the dining-hall, but take your bread with you back to the barracks? Why can’t you eat the bread with your soup the way the rest of the world does?’

Smiling with the cracks of their blue mouths and showing their gums, toothless from scurvy, the local residents would answer the naïve newcomers:

‘In two weeks each of you will understand, and each of you will do the same.’

How could they be told that they had never in their lives known true hunger, hunger that lasts for years and breaks the will? How could anyone explain the passionate, all-engulfing desire to prolong

the process of eating, the supreme bliss of washing down one's bread ration with a mug of tasteless, but hot melted snow in the barracks?

But not all of the newcomers shook their heads in contempt and walked away.

Major Pugachov clearly realized that they had been delivered to their deaths – to replace these living corpses. They had been brought in the fall. With winter coming on, there was no place to run to, but in the summer a man could at least die free even if he couldn't hope to escape completely.

It was virtually the only conspiracy in twenty years, and its web was spun all winter.

Pugachov realized that only those who did not work in the mine's general work gang could survive the winter and still be capable of an escape attempt. After a few weeks in the work gang no one would run anywhere.

Slowly, one by one, the participants of the conspiracy became trusties. Soldatov became a cook, and Pugachov himself was appointed activities director. There were two work gang leaders, a paramedic and Ivashenko, who had formerly been a mechanic and now repaired weapons for the guards.

But no one was permitted outside 'the wire' without guards.

The blinding Kolyma spring began – without a single drop of rain, without any movement of ice on the rivers, without the singing of any bird. Little by little, the sun melted the snow, leaving it only in those crevices where warm rays couldn't pierce. In the canyons and ravines, the snow lay like silver bullion till the next year.

And the designated day arrived.

There was a knock at the door of the guard hut next to the camp gates where one door led in and the other out of the camp. The guard on duty yawned and glanced at the clock. It was five a.m. 'Just five,' he thought.

The guard threw back the latch and admitted the man who had knocked. It was the camp cook, the convict Gorbunov. He'd come

for the keys to the food storeroom. The keys were kept in the guardhouse, and Gorbunov came for them three times a day. He returned them later.

The guard on duty was supposed to open the kitchen cupboard, but he knew it was hopeless to try to control the cook, that no locks would help if the cook wanted to steal, so he entrusted the keys to the cook – especially at five in the morning.

The guard had worked more than ten years in Kolyma, had been receiving a double salary for a long time, and had given the keys to the cooks thousands of times.

‘Take ’em,’ he muttered and reached for the ruler to write up the morning report.

Gorbunov walked behind the guard, took the keys from the nail, put them in his pocket, and grabbed the guard from behind by the neck. At that very moment the door opened and the mechanic, Ivashenko, came through the door leading into the camp.

Ivashenko helped Gorbunov strangle the guard and drag his body behind the cabinet. Ivashenko stuck the guard’s revolver into his own pocket. Through the window that faced outward they could see a second guard returning along the path. Hurriedly Ivashenko donned the coat and cap of the dead man, snapped the belt shut, and sat down at the table as if he were the guard. The second guard opened the door and strode into the dark hovel of the guardhouse. He was immediately seized, strangled, and thrown behind the cabinet.

Gorbunov put on the guard’s clothing; the two conspirators now had uniforms and weapons. Everything was proceeding according to Major Pugachov’s schedule. Suddenly the wife of the second guard appeared. She’d come for the keys that her husband had accidentally taken with him.

‘We won’t strangle the woman,’ said Gorbunov, and she was tied, gagged with a towel, and put in the corner.

One of the work gangs returned from work. This had been foreseen. The overseer who entered the guardhouse was

immediately disarmed and bound by the two 'guards'. His rifle was now in the hands of the escapees. From that moment Major Pugachov took command of the operation.

The area before the gates was open to fire from two guard towers. The sentries noticed nothing unusual.

A work gang was formed somewhat earlier than usual, but in the north who can say what is early and what is late? It seemed early, but maybe it was late.

The work gang of ten men moved down the road to the mine, two by two in column. In the front and in the rear, six meters from the column of prisoners as required by the instructions, were two overcoated guards. One of them held a rifle.

From the guard tower the sentry noticed that the group turned from the road on to the path that led past the buildings where all sixty of the guards were quartered.

The sleeping quarters of the guards were located in the far end of the building. Just before the door stood the guard hut of the man on duty, and pyramids of rifles. Drowsing by the window the guard noticed, in a half-sleep, that one of the other guards was leading a gang of prisoners down the path past the windows of the guard quarters.

'That must be Chernenko,' the duty officer thought. 'I must remember to write a report on him.'

The duty officer was grand master of petty squabbles, and he never missed a legitimate opportunity to play a dirty trick on someone.

This was his last thought. The door flew open and three soldiers came running into the barracks. Two rushed to the doors of the sleeping quarters and the third shot the duty officer point-blank. The soldiers were followed by the prisoners, who rushed to the pyramid of weapons; in their hands were rifles and machine-guns. Major Pugachov threw open the door to the sleeping quarters. The soldiers, barefoot and still in their underwear, rushed to the door, but two machine-gun bursts at the ceiling stopped them.

‘Lie down,’ Pugachov ordered, and the soldiers crawled under their cots. The machine-gunners remained on guard beside the door.

The ‘work gang’ changed unhurriedly into military uniform and began gathering up food, weapons, and ammunition.

Pugachov ordered them not to take any food except biscuits and chocolate. In return they took as many weapons and as much ammunition as possible.

The paramedic hung the first-aid bag over his shoulder.

Once again the escapees felt they were soldiers.

Before them was the taiga, but was it any more terrible than the marshes of Stokhod?

They walked out on to the highway, and Pugachov raised his hand to stop a passing truck.

‘Get out!’ He opened the door of the driver’s cab.

‘But I...’

‘Climb out, I tell you.’

The driver got out, and Georgadze, lieutenant of the tank troops, got behind the wheel. Beside him was Pugachov. The escapee soldiers crawled into the back, and the truck sped off.

‘There ought to be a right turn about here.’

‘We’re out of gas!’

Pugachov cursed.

They entered the taiga as if they were diving into water, disappearing immediately in the enormous silent forest. Checking the map, they remained on the cherished path to freedom, pushing their way straight through the amazing local underbrush.

Camp was set up quickly for the night, as if they were used to doing it.

Only Ashot and Malinin couldn’t manage to quiet down.

‘What’s the problem over there?’ asked Pugachov.

‘Ashot keeps trying to prove that Adam was deported from paradise to Ceylon.’

‘Why Ceylon?’

‘That’s what the Muslims say,’ responded Ashot.

‘Are you a Tartar?’

‘Not me, my wife is.’

‘I never heard anything of the sort,’ said Pugachov, smiling.

‘Right, and neither did I,’ Malinin joined in.

‘All right, knock it off. Let’s get some sleep.’

It was cold and Major Pugachov woke up. Soldatov was sitting up, alert, holding the machine-gun on his knees. Pugachov lay on his back and located the North Star, the favorite star of all wanderers. The constellations here were arranged differently than in European Russia; the map of the firmament was slightly shifted, and the Big Dipper had slid down to the horizon. The taiga was cold and stern, and the enormous twisted pines stood far from each other. The forest was filled with the anxious silence familiar to all hunters. This time Pugachov was not the hunter, but a tracked beast, and the forest silence was thrice dangerous.

It was his first night of liberty, the first night after long months and years of torment. Lying on his back, he recalled how everything before him had begun as if it were a detective film. It was as if Pugachov were playing back a film of his twelve comrades so that the lazy everyday course of events flashed by with unbelievable speed. And now they had finished the film and were staring at the inscription, *The End*. They were free, but this was only the beginning of the struggle, the game, of life...

Major Pugachov remembered the German prisoner-of-war camp from which he had escaped in 1944. The front was nearing the town, and he was working as a truck driver on clean-up details inside the enormous camp. He recalled how he had driven through the single strand of barbed wire at high speed, ripping up the wooden posts that had been hurriedly punched into the ground. He remembered the sentry shots, shouting, the mad, zigzag drive through the town, the abandoned truck, the night road to the front

and the meetings with his army, the interrogation, the accusation of espionage, and the sentence – twenty-five years.

Major Pugachov remembered how Vlasov's emissaries had come to the camp with a 'manifesto' to the hungry, tormented Russian soldiers.

'Your government has long since renounced you. Any prisoner of war is a traitor in the eyes of your government,' the Vlasovites said. And they showed Moscow newspapers with their orders and speeches. The prisoners of war had already heard of this earlier. It was no accident that Russian prisoners of war were the only ones not to receive packages. Frenchmen, Americans, Englishmen, and prisoners of all nations received packages, letters, had their own national clubs, and enjoyed each other's friendship. The Russians had nothing except hunger and bitterness for the entire world. It was no wonder that so many men from the German prisoner-of-war camps joined the 'Russian Army of Liberation'.

Major Pugachov did not believe Vlasov's officers until he made his way back to the Red Army. Everything that the Vlasovites had said was true. The government had no use for him. The government was afraid of him. Later came the cattle cars with bars on the windows and guards, the long trip to Eastern Siberia, the sea, the ship's hold, and the gold-mines of the far north. And the hungry winter.

Pugachov sat up, and Soldatov gestured to him with his hand. It was Soldatov who had the honor of beginning the entire affair, although he was among the last to be accepted into the conspiracy. Soldatov had not lost his courage, panicked, or betrayed anyone. A good man!

At his feet lay Captain Khrustalyov, a flier whose fate was similar to Pugachov's: his plane shot down by the Germans, captivity, hunger, escape, and a military tribunal and the forced-labor camp. Khrustalyov had just turned over on his other side, and his cheek was red from where he had been lying on it. It was Khrustalyov to whom Pugachov had first chosen several months before to reveal his plan. They agreed it was better to die than be a convict, better to



die with a gun in hand than be exhausted by hunger, rifle butts, and the boots of the guards.

Both Khrustalyov and the major were men of action, and they discussed in minute detail the insignificant chance for which these twelve men were risking their lives. The plan was to hijack a plane from the airport. There were several airports in the vicinity, and the men were on their way through the taiga to the nearest one. Khrustalyov was the group leader whom the escapees sent for after attacking the guards. Pugachov didn't want to leave without his closest friend. Now Khrustalyov was sleeping quietly and soundly.

Next to him lay Ivashenko, the mechanic who repaired the guards' weapons. Ivashenko had learned everything they needed to know for a successful operation: where the weapons were kept, who was on duty, where the munitions stores were. Ivashenko had been a military intelligence officer.

Levitsky and Ignatovich, pilots and friends of Captain Khrustalyov, lay pressed against each other.

The tankman, Polyakov, had spread his hands on the backs of his neighbors, the huge Georgadze and the bald joker Ashot, whose surname the major couldn't remember at the moment. Head resting on his first-aid bag, Sasha Malinin was sound asleep. He'd started out as a paramedic – first in the army, then in the camps, then under Pugachov's command.

Pugachov smiled. Each had surely imagined the escape in his own way, but Pugachov could see that everything was going smoothly and each understood the other perfectly. Pugachov was convinced he had done the right thing. Each knew that events were developing as they should. There was a commander, there was a goal – a confident commander and a difficult goal. There were weapons and freedom. They slept a sound soldier's sleep even in this empty pale-lilac polar night with its strange but beautiful light in which the trees cast no shadows.

He had promised them freedom, and they had received freedom. He led them to their deaths, and they didn't fear death.

‘No one betrayed us,’ thought Pugachov, ‘right up to the very last day.’ Many people in the camp had known of the planned escape. Selection of participants had taken several months, and Pugachov had spoken openly to many who refused, but no one had turned them in. This knowledge reconciled Pugachov with life.

‘They’re good men,’ he whispered and smiled.

They ate some biscuits and chocolate and went on in silence, led by the almost indistinguishable path.

‘It’s a bear path,’ said Soldatov who had hunted in Siberia.

Pugachov and Khrustalyov climbed up to the pass to a cartographic tripod and used the telescope to look down to the gray stripes of the river and highway. The river was like any other river, but the highway was filled with trucks and people for tens of miles.

‘Must be convicts,’ suggested Khrustalyov.

Pugachov examined them carefully.

‘No, they’re soldiers looking for us. We’ll have to split up,’ said Pugachov. ‘Eight men can sleep in the haystacks, and the four of us will check out that ravine. We’ll return by morning if everything looks all right.’

They passed through a small grove of trees to the river-bed. They had to run back.

‘Look, there are too many of them. We’ll have to go back up the river.’

Breathing heavily, they quickly climbed back up the river-bed, inadvertently dislodging loose rocks that roared down right to the feet of the attackers.

Levitsky turned, fired, and fell. A bullet had caught him square in the eye.

Georgadze stopped beside a large rock, turned, and stopped the soldiers coming after them with a machine-gun burst. But it was not for long; his machine-gun jammed, and only the rifle was still functioning.

‘Go on alone,’ said Khrustalyov to the major. ‘I’ll cover you.’ He aimed methodically, shooting at anyone who showed himself. Khrustalyov caught up with them, shouting: ‘They’re coming.’ He fell, and people began running out from behind the large rock.

Pugachov rushed forward, fired at the attackers, and leaped down from the pass’s plateau into the narrow river-bed. The stones he knocked loose as he fell roared down the slope.

He ran through the roadless taiga until his strength failed.

Above the forest meadow the sun rose, and the people hiding in haystacks could easily make out figures of men in military uniforms on all sides of the meadow.

‘I guess this is the end?’ Ivashenko said, and nudged Khachaturian with his elbow.

‘Why the end?’ Ashot said as he aimed. The rifle shot rang out, and a soldier fell on the path.

At a command the soldiers rushed the swamp and haystacks. Shots cracked and groans were heard.

The attack was repulsed. Several wounded men lay among the clumps of marsh grass.

‘Medic, crawl over there,’ an officer ordered. They’d shown foresight and brought along Yasha Kushen, a former resident of West Byelorussia, now a convict paramedic. Without saying a word, convict Kushen crawled over to the wounded man, waving his first-aid bag. The bullet that struck Kushen in the shoulder stopped him halfway.

The head of the guard detail that the escapees had just disarmed jumped up without any sign of fear and shouted:

‘Hey, Ivashenko, Soldatov, Pugachov. Give up, you’re surrounded. There’s no way out!’

‘OK, come and get the weapons,’ shouted Ivashenko from behind the haystack.

And Bobylyov, head of the guards, ran splashing through the marsh toward the haystacks.

He had covered half the way when Ivashenko's shot cracked out. The bullet caught Bobylyov directly in the forehead.

'Good boy,' Soldatov praised his comrade. 'The chief was so brave because they would have either shot him for our escape or given him a sentence in the camps. Hold your ground!'

They were shooting from all directions. Machine-guns began to crackle.

Soldatov felt a burning sensation in both legs, and the head of the dead Ivashenko fell on his shoulder.

Another haystack fell silent. A dozen bodies lay in the marsh.

Soldatov kept on shooting until something struck him in the head and he lost consciousness.

Nikolay Braude, chief surgeon of the main hospital, was summoned by Major General Artemyev, one of four Kolyma generals and chief of the whole Kolyma camp. Braude was sent to the village of Lichan together with 'two paramedics, bandages, and surgical instruments'. That was how the order read.

Braude didn't try to guess what might have happened and quickly set out as directed in a beat-up one-and-a-half-ton hospital truck. Powerful Studebakers loaded with armed soldiers streamed past the hospital truck on the highway. It was only about twenty miles, but because of frequent stops caused by heavy traffic and roadblocks to check documents, it took Braude three hours to reach the area.

Major General Artemyev was waiting for the surgeon in the apartment of the local camp head. Both Braude and Artemyev were long-term residents of Kolyma and fate had brought them together a number of times in the past.

'What's up, a war?' Braude asked the general when they met.

'I don't know if you'd call it a war, but there were twenty-eight dead in the first battle. You'll see the wounded yourself.'

While Braude washed his hands in a basin hanging on the door, the general told him of the escape.

'And you called for planes, I suppose? A couple of squadrons, a few bombs here and there... Or maybe you opted for an atom

bomb?’

‘That’s right, make a joke of it,’ said the general. ‘I tell you I’m not joking when I say that I’m waiting for my orders. I’ll be lucky if I just lose my job. They could even try me. Things like that have happened before.’

Yes, Braude knew that things like that had happened before. Several years earlier three thousand people were sent on foot in winter to one of the ports, but supplies stored on shore were destroyed by a storm while the group was underway. Of three thousand, only three hundred people remained alive. The second-in-command in the camp administration who had signed the orders to send the group was made a scapegoat and tried.

Braude and his paramedics worked until evening, removing bullets, amputating, bandaging. Only soldiers of the guard were among the wounded; there were no escapees.

The next day toward evening more wounded were brought in. Surrounded by officers of the guard, two soldiers carried in the first and only escapee whom Braude was to see. The escapee was in military uniform and differed from the soldiers only in that he was unshaven. Both shin-bones and his left shoulder were broken by bullets, and there was a head wound with damage to the parietal bone. The man was unconscious.

Braude rendered him first aid and, as Artemyev had ordered, the wounded man and his guards were taken to the central hospital where there were the necessary facilities for a serious operation.

It was all over. Nearby stood an army truck covered with a tarpaulin. It contained the bodies of the dead escapees. Next to it was a second truck with the bodies of the dead soldiers.

But Major Pugachov was crawling down the edge of the ravine.

They could have sent the army home after this victory, but trucks with soldiers continued to travel along the thousand-mile highway for many days.

They couldn’t find the twelfth man – Major Pugachov.

Soldatov took a long time to recover – to be shot. But then that was the only death sentence out of sixty. Such was the number of friends and acquaintances who were sent before the military tribunal. The head of the local camp was sentenced to ten years. The head of the medical section, Dr Potalina, was acquitted, and she changed her place of employment almost as soon as the trial was over. Major General Artemyev's words were prophetic: he was removed from his position in the guard.

Pugachov dragged himself into the narrow throat of the cave. It was a bear's den, the beast's winter quarters, and the animal had long since left to wander the taiga. Bear hairs could still be seen on the cave walls and stone floor.

'How quickly it's all ended,' thought Pugachov. 'They'll bring dogs and find me.'

Lying in the cave, he remembered his difficult male life, a life that was to end on a bear path in the taiga. He remembered people – all of whom he had respected and loved, beginning with his mother. He remembered his schoolteacher, Maria Ivanovna, and her quilted jacket of threadbare black velvet that was turning red. There were many, many others with whom fate had thrown him together.

But better than all, more noble than all were his eleven dead comrades. None of the other people in his life had endured such disappointments, deceit, lies. And in this northern hell they had found within themselves the strength to believe in him, Pugachov, and to stretch out their hands to freedom. These men who had died in battle were the best men he had known in his life.

Pugachov picked a blueberry from a shrub that grew at the entrance to the cave. Last year's wrinkled fruit burst in his fingers, and he licked them clean. The overripe fruit was as tasteless as snow water. The skin of the berry stuck to his dry tongue.

Yes, they were the best. He remembered Ashot's surname now; it was Khachaturian.

Major Pugachov remembered each of them, one after the other, and smiled at each. Then he put the muzzle of the pistol in his

mouth and for the last time in his life fired a shot.

# *Kolyma Tales*

VARLAM SHALAMOV

*Translated from the Russian by* JOHN GLAD



PENGUIN BOOKS



## PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

[www.penguin.com](http://www.penguin.com)

The following stories in this collection were first published in 1980 in the USA by W. W. Norton & Company, ©John Glad 1980, under the title *Kolyma Tales. On Tick, In the Night, Dry Rations, A Child's Drawings, Condensed Milk, The Snake Charmer, Shock Therapy, The Lawyers' Plot, Magic, A Piece of Meat, Major Pugachov's Last Battle, The Used-Book Dealer, Lend-Lease, Sententious, The Train and Quiet*. Other stories in this collection, as follows, were first published in 1981 in the USA by W. W. Norton & Company, © John Glad 1981, under the title *Graphite. Through the Snow, An Individual Assignment, The Apostle Paul, Berries, Tamara the Bitch, Cherry Brandy, The Golden Taiga, A Day Off, Dominoes, Typhoid Quarantine, The Procurator of Judea, The Lepers, Descendant of a Decembrist, Committees for the Poor, The Seizure, An Epitaph, Handwriting, Captain Tolly's Love, The Green Procurator, The Red Cross, Women in the Criminal World, Grisbka Logun's Thermometer, The Life of Engineer Kipreev, Mr Popp's Visit, The Letter, Fire and Water and Graphite*.

This collection published in Penguin Books 1994

Original stories copyright © Iraida Pavlovna Sirotinskaya, 1980

Translation copyright © John Glad, 1980, 1981, 1994

All rights reserved

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

ISBN: 978-0-14-196195-8

# ***Contents***

Foreword

## ***Kolyma Tales***

Through the Snow

On Tick

In the Night

Carpenters

An Individual Assignment

A 'Pushover' Job

Dry Rations

The Injector

The Apostle Paul

Berries

Tamara the Bitch

Cherry Brandy

A Child's Drawings

Condensed Milk

The Snake Charmer

The Golden Taiga

Vaska Denisov, Kidnapper of Pigs

A Day Off

Dominoes

Shock Therapy

The Lawyers' Plot

Typhoid Quarantine

### *The Left Bank*

The Procurator of Judea

The Lepers

Descendant of a Decembrist

Committees for the Poor

Magic

A Piece of Meat

Esperanto

Major Pugachov's Last Battle

The Used-Book Dealer

Lend-Lease

Sententious

### *The Virtuoso Shovelman*

The Seizure

An Epitaph

Handwriting

The Businessman

Captain Tolly's Love

In the Bathhouse

The Green Procurator

My First Tooth

Prosthetic Appliances

The Train

## *Essays on the Criminal World*

The Red Cross

Women in the Criminal World

## *Resurrection of the Larch*

Quiet

Grishka Logun's Thermometer

Chief of Political Control

The Life of Engineer Kipreev

Mister Popp's Visit

The Theft

The Letter

Fire and Water

Graphite