

Kolyma Tales

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Translated from the Russian by JOHN GLAD



PENGUIN BOOKS

He had a fat repulsive pink face and was dressed in a black fur coat. His voile shirt was open at the chest.

'So you know each other? Captain Rebrov didn't have time to squash you. An enemy of the people ...'

'What are you, a friend of the people?'

'At least I'm not a political prisoner. I was never in the secret police and I never did anything to the working people. But it's because of your kind that we go to jail.'

'What are you, a thief?' I asked.

'Maybe.'

'OK, stop it, stop it,' Parfentiev broke in.

The doors clanked open.

'Come on out!'

There were about seven men standing at the entrance. Parfentiev and I walked up to them.

'Are all of you lawyers?' asked Parfentiev.

'Yes! Yes!'

'What happened? Why are we being released?'

Some all-knowing soul said quietly:

'Captain Rebrov has been arrested. Everyone arrested under his instructions is being released.'

Typhoid Quarantine

The man in the white gown held out his rosy, washed hand, and Andreev put his sweaty, stiff military shirt into the outstretched fingers. The man jerked back his hand and shook it.

'I don't have any underwear,' Andreev said indifferently.

The orderly then took Andreev's shirt in both hands, turned the sleeves inside out with an agile, practiced movement, and took one look ...

'He's full of them, Lydia Ivanovna,' he said and bellowed at Andreev: 'How could you let yourself get so lousy?'

But the doctor, Lydia Ivanovna, interrupted him.

'It's not their fault,' she said quietly in a tone of reproach, stressing the word 'their', and took a stethoscope from the table.

Andreev remembered this red-haired woman for the rest of his life, thanked her a thousand times, and thought about her with warmth and tenderness. Why? Because she had stressed the word '*their*' in this, the only sentence that Andreev had ever heard from her. He thanked her for a kind word said at the right time. Did she ever learn of his thanks?

The examination was brief and did not require a stethoscope. Lydia Ivanovna breathed on a violet rubber stamp and pressed it to a printed form, leaning on it heavily with both hands. She wrote a few words on it, and Andreev was taken away.

The guard, who had been waiting in the entrance hall, did not take Andreev back to prison but to one of the warehouses in the center of the settlement. The area around the warehouse had a barbed-wire fence with the prescribed ten strands and a gate, next to which stood a sentry wearing a leather coat and holding a rifle. They entered the yard and approached the warehouse. A bright light shone through the crack in the door. The door was made for trucks, not people, and the guard opened it with great difficulty. The smell of dirty bodies, sour human sweat, and old clothing struck Andreev's nostrils. A muffled hum of human voices filled the vast box. The walls were entirely covered with four-tiered bunks cut from whole larch trees. The bunks were built solidly, to last for ever — like Caesar's bridges. More than a thousand people lay on the shelves of the huge warehouse. This was only one of twenty enormous warehouses packed with living goods. There was a typhoid quarantine in port, and there hadn't been any 'outgoing shipments' for more than a month.

There had been a breakdown in the camp's blood circulation system, whose erythrocytes were living people. Trucks stood idle, and the mines lengthened the prisoners' workday. In the town itself the bakery was not able to keep up with orders. Every prisoner had to receive 500 grams (a little over a pound) of bread per day, and bread was even being baked in private apartments. The authorities were growing ever more bitter over the fact that the town was slowly filling up with convict 'slag' that had been thrown out by the mines in the taiga.

There were more than a thousand human beings in the warehouse to which Andreev had been brought and which bore the then-fashionable title of 'section'. This multitude was not immediately noticeable. On the upper bunks people lay naked in the heat; the prisoners on and beneath the lower

bunks wore padded coats, pea jackets and hats. No one will ever explain why a convict almost never sleeps on his side. Most of the men lay on their backs, and their bodies seemed like growths or bumps in the wood, like bent boards in the enormous shelves.

People were clustered in small groups either around storytellers — 'novelists' — or around incidents, and given such a concentration of people, incidents occurred nearly every minute. These men were being kept in the transit camp and had not been sent to work for more than a month. They were sent out only to the bathhouse to disinfect their clothing. Every day the camps lost twenty thousand workdays, one hundred and sixty thousand hours, perhaps even three hundred and twenty thousand hours; workdays vary. Or a thousand days of life were saved. Twenty thousand days of life. Statistics is a wily science, and figures can be read in different ways.

Everyone was in his place when food was handed out, distributed to ten prisoners at a time. There were so many people that no sooner had breakfast been distributed than it was time for lunch. As soon as lunch had been served, it was time for supper. Only bread and 'tea' (warm boiled water) and half a herring were distributed to each man in the morning. No more bread was issued for the rest of the day. Lunch consisted of soup, and only kasha was served for supper. Nevertheless, there was not sufficient time to serve even this quantity.

The assignment man showed Andreev his place and pointed to the second bunk. A grumble of protest came from the top bunk, but the assignment man cursed back at the grumblers. Andreev gripped the edge of the shelf with both hands and unsuccessfully attempted to bring up his right leg. The assignment man's strong arm tossed him upward, and Andreev plunked down among the naked bodies. No one paid him any

attention. The 'registration' and settlement procedure had been carried out.

Andreev slept. He awoke only when food was distributed, after which he would carefully and precisely lick his hands and fall asleep again. His sleep was not sound, however, since the lice refused to leave him in peace.

No one questioned him, even though there were many people here from the taiga, and the rest were destined to end up there. They all knew this, and for that very reason they wanted to know as little as possible about their inevitable fate. They were right, Andreev reasoned. They should not know everything that he had seen. Nothing could be avoided or foreseen. What use were extra fears? These were living people, and Andreev was a representative of the dead. His knowledge, a dead man's knowledge, was of no use to them, the living.

Bathroom time came two days later. Bathing and clothing disinfection were nothing but an annoyance, and all the prisoners prepared themselves reluctantly. Andreev, however, wanted to rid himself of lice. He had all the time in the world, and he examined the seams of his faded military shirt several times a day. But only the disinfection chamber held the promise of final victory. He went to the bathhouse willingly and, although they issued him no underwear and he had to pull his reddish military shirt over his naked body, he no longer felt the usual bites.

At the bathhouse, the usual portion of water was issued — one basin of hot water and one of cold — but Andreev managed to deceive the water man and get an extra basin. A tiny piece of soap was issued, but it was possible to gather discarded fragments from the floor and work up a good lather. This was his best bath in a year. So what if blood and pus seeped from the scurvy ulcers on his shins? So what if people in the bathhouse recoiled from him in horror? So what if they walked around him and his lousy clothing in disgust?

When clothing was returned from the disinfection chamber, the fur socks of Andreev's neighbor Ogniov had shrunk so much that they looked like toys. Ogniov burst into tears, for the socks were his salvation in the north. Andreev, however, stared at him without sympathy. He had seen too many men cry for too many reasons. Some pretended, others were mentally disturbed, and still others had lost hope and were desperately bitter. Some cried from the cold. Andreev had never seen anyone cry from hunger.

When they returned through the silent city, the aluminum-hued puddles had cooled, and the fresh air had a smell of spring. After the session in the bathhouse, Andreev slept soundly. Ogniov, who had forgotten the incident in the bathhouse, said Andreev had 'gotten his fill of sleep'.

No one was permitted to leave, but there was one job in the section for which a man could be allowed to cross through the 'wire'. True, this had nothing to do with leaving the camp settlement and crossing the outer wire — a series of three fences, each with ten strands of barbed wire and a forbidden area beyond them circumscribed by another low fence. No one even dreamt of that. They could only contemplate the possibility of leaving the immediate yard. Beyond the barbed wire of the yard was a cafeteria, a kitchen, storehouses, a hospital — in a word, a very different life, one forbidden to Andreev. Only one person could pass through the fence — the sewage disposal man. And when he suddenly died (life is full of fortunate coincidences!), Ogniov accomplished miracles of energy and intuition. For two days he ate no bread. Then he traded the bread for a pressed-fiber suitcase.

'I got it from Baron Mandel, Andreev!'

Baron Mandel! A descendant of Pushkin! Far below, Andreev could make out the long, narrow-shouldered figure of the Baron with his tiny bald skull, but he had never had an opportunity to make his acquaintance.

Since he had been in quarantine for only a few months, Ogniov still had a wool jacket left over from the 'outside'. He presented the assignment man with the jacket and the suitcase and in exchange received the sewage disposal job. Two weeks later, Ogniov was nearly strangled to death in the dark by criminals. They took three thousand rubles from him. The ability to leave and enter quarantine evidently provided a number of business opportunities.

Andreev scarcely saw Ogniov during the heyday of his commercial career. Beaten and tormented, Ogniov made a confession to Andreev one night as he returned to his old place:

"They cleaned me out today, but I'll beat them in the end. They think they know cards, but I'll get it all back!"

Ogniov never helped Andreev with bread or money, nor was this the custom in such instances. In terms of camp ethics, he was acting quite normally.

One day Andreev realized with amazement that he had survived. It was extremely difficult to get up from his bunk, but he was able to do it. The main thing was that he didn't have to work and could simply lie prone. Even a pound of bread, three spoons of kasha and a bowl of watery soup were enough to resurrect a person so long as he didn't have to work.

It was at this precise moment that he realized he felt no fear and placed no value on his life. He also knew that he had passed through a great test and had survived. He knew he would be able to use his terrible experience in the mine for his own benefit. The opportunity for a convict to exercise choice, free will, did, in fact, exist - however minutely. Such an opportunity was a reality that could save his life, given the right circumstances. Andreev was prepared for the great battle when he would fight a beast with the cunning of a beast. He had been deceived, and he would deceive. He would not die. He would not permit that to happen.

He would fulfill the desires and commands his body had imparted to him at the gold-mine. He had lost the battle at the mine, but it would not be the last he fought. He was the slag rejected from the mine. He had been deceived by his family, deceived by his country. Everything - love, energy, ability - had been crushed and trampled. Any justification the mind might seek was false, a lie, and Andreev knew this. Only the instinct of a beast, roused by the mine, could and did suggest a way out.

Precisely here, on these Cyclopien shelves, Andreev realized that he was worth something, that he could respect himself. He was still alive, and he had neither betrayed nor sold out anyone during the investigation or in the camp. He had succeeded in speaking the truth for the most part, and in suppressing his own fear. It was not that he feared nothing. No, but moral barriers had now been more clearly and precisely defined; everything, in fact, had become clear and precise. It was clear, for example, that Andreev was guilty of nothing. His former health was lost without a trace, broken for ever. But was it for ever? When Andreev had been first brought to this town, he thought he might live for another two or three weeks. To regain his former strength he would have needed complete rest for many months in resort conditions, with milk and chocolate. Since it was clear, however, that Andreev would never see any such resort, he would have to die. But that was not terrible; many of his comrades had died. Something stronger than death would not permit him to die. Love? Bitterness? No, a person lives by virtue of the same reasons as a tree, a stone, a dog. It was this that Andreev had grasped, had sensed with every fiber of his being precisely here at the city transit prison camp during the typhoid quarantine.

The scratch marks on Andreev's hands and arms healed faster than did his other wounds. Little by little, the turtle-shell armor into which his skin had been transformed disappeared. The bright, rosy tips of his frostbitten fingers began to darken; the microscopically thin skin, which had covered them after the frostbite blisters ruptured, thickened slightly. And, above all, he could bend the fingers of his left hand. In a year and a half at the mines, both of Andreev's hands had molded themselves around the handles of a pick and shovel. He never expected to be able to straighten out his hands again. When he ate, he would grasp his spoon by pinching the handle with the tips of his fingers, and he even forgot that a spoon could be held in any other manner. His living hand was like a hook, an artificial limb. It fulfilled only the functions of an artificial hand. He could, if he wished, use it to cross himself when praying to God. But in his heart there was nothing but bitterness, and his spiritual wounds could not so easily be healed. They were never to heal.

At last, to his amazement, Andreev managed to straighten out his left hand one day in the bathhouse. Soon would come the turn of the right hand – still bent claw-fashion. At night Andreev would quietly touch his right hand, and it seemed to him that it was on the verge of opening. He bit his fingernails in the neatest fashion and then proceeded to chew his dirty, thick, slightly moistened skin – a section at a time. This hygienic operation was one of Andreev's few amusements when he was not eating or sleeping.

The bloody cracks on the soles of his feet no longer hurt as much as they used to. The scurvy ulcers on his legs had not yet healed and required bandaging, but his wounds grew fewer and fewer in number, and were replaced by blue-black spots that looked like the brand of some slave-owner. Only his big

toes would not heal; the frostbite had reached the bone marrow, and pus slowly seeped from them. Of course, there was less pus than there had been back at the mine, where the rubber galoshes that served as summer footwear were so full of pus and blood that his feet sloshed at every step – as if through a puddle.

Many years would pass before Andreev's toes would heal. And for many years after healing, whenever it was cold or even slightly chilly at night, they would remind him of the northern mine. But Andreev thought of the future. He had learned at the mine not to plan his life further than a day in advance. He strove toward close goals, like any man who is only a short distance from death. Now he desired one thing alone – that the typhoid quarantine might last for ever. This, however, could not be, and the day arrived when the quarantine was up.

That morning all the residents of the section were driven out into the yard. The prisoners milled around silently, shivering for hours behind the wire fence. The assignment man stood on a barrel and shouted out the names in a hoarse, desperate voice. Those whose names were called left through the gate – never to return. Out on the highway trucks roared – roared so loudly that it was difficult to hear the assignment man.

'Don't let them call me, don't let them call me,' Andreev implored the fates in a childish invocation. No, he would not be lucky. If they didn't call for him today, they would call for him tomorrow. He would return to hunger, beatings, and death in the gold-mines. His frostbitten fingers and toes began to ache, as did his ears and cheeks. Andreev shifted his weight more and more frequently from one foot to the other. He raised his shoulders and breathed into his clasped hands, but it was no easy thing to warm his numb hands and sick feet. It

was all of no use. He was helpless in the struggle with the monstrous machine whose teeth were grinding up his entire body.

'Voronov! Voronov!' the assignment man called out. 'Voronov! The bastard has to be here ...' In a rage the assignment man threw the thin yellow folder on to a barrel and put his foot down on the papers.

Suddenly Andreev understood. As lightning shows the way in a storm, so his road to salvation was revealed. In his excitement he immediately grew bold and moved forward toward the assignment man, who was calling out one name after the other. People disappeared from the yard, one after the other. But the crowd was still enormous. Now, now ...

'Andreev!' the assignment man shouted.

Andreev remained silent and examined the assignment man's shaven jowls. When he had finished his examination, Andreev's gaze shifted to the remaining folders. There were only a few left. 'The last truck,' Andreev thought.

'Sychoy! Answer - first name and patronymic!'

'Vladimir Ivanovich,' an elderly convict answered, according to the rules, and pushed the crowd aside.

'Crime? Sentence? Step out!'

A few more persons responded to the assignment officer's call. They left, and the assignment man left with them. The remaining prisoners were returned to the section.

The coughing, stamping, and shouting quieted down and dissolved into the polyphonic speech of hundreds of men.

Andreev wanted to live. He had set himself two goals and was resolved to achieve them. He saw, with unusual clarity, that he had to lengthen his stay here as long as he could, if possible to the very last day. He had to control himself and not make any mistakes ... Gold was death. No one in this transit prison knew that better than Andreev. No matter what

the cost, he had to avoid the taiga and the gold-mines. How could he, a slave deprived of all rights, manage this?

He had come to the conclusion that the taiga had been depopulated during the quarantine; cold, hunger, exhausting workdays, and sleeplessness must have deprived the taiga of people. That meant that trucks with prisoners would be sent to the mines from quarantine. (Official telegrams read: 'Send 200 trees.') Only when all the mines had been filled again would they begin sending people to other places - and not to dig gold in the taiga. Andreev did not care where he was sent. Just as long as it wasn't to mine gold.

Andreev did not say a word about this to anyone. He did not consult with Ogniov or Parfentyev, his comrade from the mines, or with any of the thousand people who lay with him on those warehouse shelves. He knew that, if he were to tell them of his plan, any one of them would rush to tell the camp authorities - for praise, for a cigarette butt, for no reason at all ... He knew what a heavy burden it was to keep a secret, but he could do it. Only if he told no one would he be free of fear. It was two, three, four times easier for him to slip alone through the teeth of this machine. The game was his alone; that was something he had learned at the mine.

Andreev 'did not respond' for many days. As soon as the quarantine was up, convicts were again used for work assignments, and the trick was not to be included in the large groups, since they were usually sent to do earth-moving with picks, axes, and shovels. In smaller groups of two or three persons it was easier to earn an extra piece of bread or even some sugar; Andreev had not seen sugar for more than a year and a half. His strategy was simple and accurate. All these jobs were, of course, a violation of regulations in the transit prison, but there were many people who wanted to take advantage of free labor. People assigned to earth-moving details hoped to

be able to beg for some tobacco or bread. And they succeeded — even from passers-by. Andreev would go to the vegetable storage areas, where he could eat his fill of beets and carrots and bring 'home' a few raw potatoes, which he would cook in the ashes of the stove and eat half-raw. Conditions demanded that all nutritional 'functions' be performed quickly; there were too many hungry people around.

Andreev's days were filled with activity and began to acquire a certain meaning. He had to stand in the cold every morning for two hours, listening to the scheduling officer call out names. And when the daily sacrifice had been made to Moloch, everyone would tramp back into the barracks, from where they would be taken to work.

Andreev worked at the bakery, carried garbage at the women's transit prison, and washed floors in the guards' quarters, where he would gather up the sticky, delicious meat leftovers from the officers' tables. When work was over, mountains of bread and large basins of starchy fruit pudding would be brought to the kitchen, and everyone would sit down, eat, and stuff their pockets with bread.

Most of all Andreev preferred to be sent alone, but that happened rarely. His small-group strategy failed him only once. One day the assignment man, who remembered Andreev's face (but knew him as Muravyov), said to him:

'I found you a job you'll never forget — chopping wood for the camp director. There'll be two of you.'

Joyously the two men ran ahead of the guard, who was wearing a cavalry overcoat. The guard slipped, stumbled, jumped over puddles, holding the tails of his coat with both hands. They soon reached a small house with a locked gate and barbed wire strung along the top of the fence. The camp director's orderly opened the gate, took them without a word to the woodshed, closed the door, and loosed an enormous

German shepherd into the yard. The dog kept them locked up until they had cut and split all the wood in the shed. Later that evening they were taken back to camp. They were to be sent back to do the same job the next day, but Andreev hid under his bunk and did no work at all that day.

The next morning, before bread was distributed, a simple idea occurred to Andreev, and he immediately acted upon it. He took off his boots and put them on the edge of the shelf, soles outward, so that it looked as though he himself was lying on the bunk with his boots on. Then he lay down next to them, propping his head on his forearms.

The man distributing bread quickly counted off ten persons and gave Andreev an extra portion of bread. Nevertheless, this method was not reliable, and Andreev again began to seek work outside the barracks.

Did he think of his family? No. Of freedom? No. Did he recite poetry from memory? No. Did he recall the past? No. He lived in a distracted bitterness, and nothing more.

It was then that Andreev came upon Captain Schneider.

The professional criminals had occupied a place close to the stove. Their bunks were spread with dirty quilts and pillows of various sizes. A quilt is the inevitable companion of any successful thief, the only object that he carries with him from prison to prison. If a thief does not own a quilt, he will steal one or take it away from another prisoner. As for the pillow, it is not only a rest for his head, but it can be quickly converted into a table for endless card battles. Such a table can be given any form. But it is still a pillow. Card-players will lose their pants before they will part with their pillows.

The more prominent criminals, that is, those who were the most prominent at that moment, were sitting on the quilts and pillows. Higher up, on the third shelf, where it was dark, by other pillows and quilts. It was there that the criminals

maintained the young effeminate thieves and their various other companions. Almost all the thieves were homosexuals.

The hardened criminals were surrounded by a crowd of vassals and lackeys, for the criminals considered it fashionable to be interested in 'novels' narrated orally by prisoners of literary inclination. And even in these conditions there were court barbers with bottles of perfume and a throng of sycophants eager to perform any service in exchange for a piece of bread or a bowl of soup.

'Shut up! Senechka is talking. Be quiet! Senechka wants to sleep ...'

It had been a familiar scene back at the mine.

Suddenly, among the crowd of beggars and the retinue of criminals, Andreev saw a familiar face and recognized the man's voice. There was no doubt about it - it was Captain Schneider, Andreev's cellmate in Butyr Prison.

Captain Schneider was a German communist who had been active in the Comintern, spoke beautiful Russian, was an expert on Goethe and an educated Marxist theoretician. Andreev's memory had preserved conversations with Schneider, intense conversations that took place during the long prison nights. A naturally cheerful person, this former sea captain kept the entire cell in good spirits.

Andreev could not believe his eyes.

'Schneider!'

'What do you want?' the captain turned around. His dull blue eyes showed no recognition of Andreev.

'Schneider!'

'So what do you want? You'll wake up Senechka.'

But already the edge of the blanket had been lifted, and the light revealed a pale, unhealthy face.

'Ah, captain,' came Senechka's tenor voice with a languid tone. 'I can't fall asleep without you ...'

'Right away, I'm coming,' Schneider said hurriedly.

He climbed up on the shelf, folded back the edge of the blanket, sat down, and put his hand under the blanket to scratch Senechka's heels.

Andreev walked slowly to his place. He had no desire to go on living. Even though this was a trivial event by comparison with that which he had seen and was still destined to witness, he never forgot Captain Schneider.

The number of people kept decreasing. The transit prison was being emptied. Andreev came face to face with the assignment man.

'What's your name?'

Andreev, however, had prepared himself for such an occurrence.

'Gurov,' he replied meekly.

'Wait!'

The assignment man leafed through the onion-sheet lists.

'No, it's not here.'

'Can I go?'

'Go ahead, you animal!' the scheduling officer roared.

Once he was assigned to wash dishes and clean up the cafeteria for people who had served their sentences and who were about to be released. His partner was one of those goners who were so emaciated they were known as 'wicks'. The man had just been released from prison, and it was difficult to determine his age. It was the first time this goner had worked. He kept asking what they should do, would they be fed, was it all right to ask for something to eat before they began work.

The man said he was a professor of neuropathology, and Andreev recognized his name.

Andreev knew from experience that camp cooks (and not

only camp cooks) did not like these 'Ivan Ivanoviches', as the intellectuals were contemptuously nicknamed. He advised the professor not to ask for anything in advance and gloomily thought that he himself would have to do most of the work, since the professor was too weak. This was only just, and there was no reason to be offended; Andreev himself had been a bad, weak 'partner' any number of times, and no one had ever said a word to him. Where were they all now? Where were Scheinin, Riutin, Khvostov? They had all died, and he alone, Andreev, had been resurrected. Of course, his resurrection was yet to come, but he would return to life.

Andreev's suspicions were confirmed: the professor was a weak, albeit fussy partner.

When the work was finished, the cook sat them down and placed an enormous tub of thick fish soup and a large plate of kasha before them. The professor threw up his hands in delight, but Andreev had seen men at the mines eat twenty meals, each consisting of three dishes and bread. He cast a suspicious glance at the proffered refreshments.

'No bread?' Andreev asked gloomily.

'Of course there's bread - a little.' And the cook took two pieces of bread from a cupboard.

They quickly polished off the food. On such 'visits' the prudent Andreev always saved his bread in his pocket. The professor, on the contrary, gulped the soup, broke off pieces of bread, and chewed it while large drops of dirty sweat formed on his shaven gray head.

'Here's a ruble for each of you,' the cook said. 'I don't have any more bread today.'

This was magnificent payment. There was a commissary at the transit prison, where the civilians could buy bread. Andreev told the professor about this.

'Yes, you're right,' the professor said. 'But I saw that they

also sold sweet *kvass* there. Or was it lemonade? I really want some lemonade, anything sweet.'

'It's up to you, professor, but if I were you, I'd buy bread.'

'Yes, I know, you're right,' the professor repeated, 'but I really want some sweet lemonade. Why don't you get some too?'

Andreev rejected that suggestion out of hand.

Ultimately Andreev managed to get himself assigned to washing floors alone at the bookkeeping office. Every evening he would meet the orderly, whose duties included keeping the office clean. These were two tiny rooms crowded with desks, each of which occupied more than four square yards. The work took only about ten minutes, and at first Andreev could not understand why the orderly 'hired' someone to do the job. The orderly had to carry water through the entire camp himself, and clean rags were always prepared in advance when Andreev came. The payment was generous - cheap tobacco, soup, kasha, bread, and sugar. The orderly even promised to give Andreev a light jacket, but Andreev's stay came to an end before he managed to do that.

Evidently the orderly viewed washing floors as shameful so long as he could hire some 'hard worker' to do it for him - even if it required only five minutes a day. Andreev had observed this characteristic in Russian people at the mines. If the head of the camp gave an orderly a handful of tobacco to clean the barracks, the orderly would dump half the tobacco into his pouch, and with the other half would hire a 'political' to do the job for him. The latter, in turn, would again divide up the tobacco and hire someone from his barracks for two hand-rolled cigarettes. This man, who had just finished a twelve- or fourteen-hour shift, would wash the floor at night for these two cigarettes and consider himself lucky; he could trade the cigarettes for bread.

Currency questions represent the most complex area of camp economy. Standards of measurement are amazing. Tea, tobacco, and bread are the exchangeable, 'hard' currencies.

On occasion the orderly would pay Andreev with coupons redeemable in the kitchen. These were rubber-stamped pieces of cardboard that worked rather like tokens — ten dinners, five main courses, and so on. When the orderly gave Andreev a token worth twenty portions of kasha, the twenty portions did not cover the bottom of a tin basin.

Andreev watched the professional criminals shove bright yellow thirty-ruble notes through the window, folded to look like tokens. This tactic always produced results. A large bowl filled to the brim with kasha would inevitably emerge from the window in response to such a token.

There were fewer and fewer people left in the transit prison. Finally the day arrived when the last truck was dispatched from the yard, and only two or three dozen men remained in camp.

This time they were not dismissed to the barracks but were grouped in military formation and led through the entire camp.

'Whatever they intend to do, they can't be taking us to be shot,' an enormous one-eyed man next to Andreev said.

This was precisely what Andreev had been thinking: they couldn't be taking them to be shot. All the remaining prisoners were brought to the assignment man in the bookkeeping office.

'We're going to take your fingerprints,' the assignment man said as he came out on to the porch.

'Well, if it's come to that, you can have me without raising a finger,' the one-eyed man said cheerfully. 'My name is Filipovsky.'

'How about you?'

'Pavel Andreev.'

The assignment man found their files.

'We've been looking for you for a long time,' he said without a trace of anger.

Andreev knew that he had won his battle for life. It was simply impossible for the taiga not to have sated its hunger for people. Even if they were to be shipped off, it would be to some nearby, local site. It might even be in the town itself. That would be even better. Andreev had been classified only for 'light physical labor', but he knew how abruptly such a classification could be changed. It was not his classification that would save him, but the fact that the taiga's orders had already been filled. Only local sites, where life was easier, simpler, less hungry, were still waiting for their final deliveries. There were no gold-mines in the area, and that meant there was hope for survival. This Andreev had learned during the two years he had spent at the mines and these three months in quarantine, spent under animal-like tension. Too much had been accomplished for his hopes not to be realized.

He had to wait only one night for an answer.

After breakfast, the assignment man rushed into the barracks with a list — a small list, Andreev immediately noted with satisfaction. Lists for the mines inevitably contained twenty-five men assigned to a truck, and there were always several of such sheets — not just one.

Andreev and Filipovsky were on the same list. There were other people as well — only a few, but more than just two or three.

Those whose names were on the list were taken to the familiar door of the bookkeeping department. There were three other men standing there: a gray-haired, sedate old man of imposing appearance wearing a good sheepskin coat and

felt boots; a fidgety, dirty man dressed in a quilted jacket and quilted pants with footcloths instead of socks protruding from the edges of his rubber galoshes; the third was wearing a fur jacket and a fur hat.

'That's the lot of them,' the assignment man said. 'Will they do?'

The man in the fur jacket crooked his finger at the old man.

'Who are you?'

'Yury Izgibin. Convicted under Article Fifty-Eight of the criminal code. Sentence: twenty-five years,' the old man reported vigorously.

'No, no,' the fur jacket frowned. 'What's your trade? I can learn your case history without your help ...'

'Stove-builder, sir.'

'Anything else?'

'I'm a tinsmith as well.'

'Very good.'

'How about you?' the officer shifted his gaze to Filipovsky.

The one-eyed giant said that he had been a stoker on a steamboat based in Kamenets-Podolsk.

'And how about you?'

The dignified old man unexpectedly muttered a few words in German.

'What's that all about?' the fur jacket asked with an air of curiosity.

'That's our carpenter. His name is Frisorger, and he does good work. He sort of lost his bearings, but he'll be all right.'

'Why does he speak German?'

'He's from the German Autonomous Republic of Saratov.'

'Ah ... And how about you?' This last question was directed at Andreev.

'He needs tradesmen and working people in general,' Andreev thought. 'I'll be a leather-dresser.'

'Tanner, sir.'

'Good. How old are you?'

'Thirty-one.'

The officer shook his head. But since he was an experienced man and had seen people rise from the dead, he said nothing and shifted his gaze to the fifth man, who turned out to be a member of the Esperantist Society.

'You see, I'm an agronomist. I even lectured on agronomy. But I was arrested as an Esperantist.'

'What's that - spying?' the fur coat asked indifferently.

'Something like that,' the fidgety man responded.

'What do you say?' the assignment man asked.

'I'll take them,' the officer said. 'You can't find better ones anyway. They've all been picked over.'

All five were taken to a separate room in the barracks. But there were still two or three names left in the list. Andreev was sure of that. The scheduling officer arrived.

'Where are we going?'

'To a local site, where do you think?' the assignment man said. 'Here's your boss.'

'We'll send you off in an hour. You've had three months to "fatten up", friends. It's time to get on the road.'

They were all summoned in an hour - not to a truck, but to the storeroom. 'They probably want to change clothes,' Andreev thought. 'April is here, and it'll soon be spring.' They would issue summer clothing, and he would be able to turn in his hated winter mine clothing - just cast it aside and forget it. Instead of summer clothing, however, they were issued winter clothing. Could this be an error? No, 'winter clothing' was marked in red pencil on the list.

Not understanding anything, they donned quilted vests, pea jackets, and old, patched felt boots. Jumping over the puddles, they returned to the barracks room, from which they had come to the storehouse.

Everyone was extremely nervous and silent. Only Frisorger kept muttering something in German.

'He's praying, damn him ...' Filipovsky whispered to Andreev.

'Does anyone understand what's happening?' Andreev asked.

The gray-haired stove-builder who looked like a professor was enumerating all the 'near sites': the port, a mine four kilometers from Magadan, one seventeen kilometers from Magadan, another twenty-three kilometers from the city, and still another forty-seven kilometers away ... Then he started on road construction sites - places that were only slightly better than gold-mines.

The assignment man came running.

'Come on out! March to the gate.'

Everyone left the building and went to the gates of the transit prison. Beyond the gates stood a large truck, the bed of which was covered with a green tarpaulin.

'Guards, assume command and take your prisoners.'

The guard did a head count. Andreev felt his legs and back grow cold ...

'Get in the truck!'

The guard threw back the edge of the large tarpaulin; the truck was filled with people dressed in winter clothing.

'Get in!'

All five climbed in together. All were silent. The guard got in the cab, the motor roared up, and the truck moved down the road leading to the main highway.

'They're taking us to the mine four kilometers from Magadan,' the stove-builder said.

Posts marking kilometers floated past. All five put their heads together near a crack in the canvas. They could not believe their eyes ...

'Seventeen ...'

'Twenty-three ...' Filipovsky said.

'A local mine, the bastards!' the stove-builder hissed in a rage.

For a long time the truck wound down the twisted highway between the crags. The mountains resembled barge haulers with bent backs.

'Forty-seven,' the fidgety Esperantist squealed in despair.

The truck rushed on.

'Where are we going?' Andreev asked, gripping someone's shoulder.

'We'll spend the night at Atka, 208 kilometers from Magadan.'

'And after that?'

'I don't know ... Give me a smoke.'

Puffing heavily, the truck climbed a pass in the Yablonovy Range.