

1

When I took my hands out of the water, the air felt warm. Even so, big hunks of ice were gripping onto the laundry's ceiling and walls. I was washing sheets at the sink. My hands were bleeding. Whenever I took a break, I treated the wounds with a white handkerchief which, years before, in my past life, Bill used to rub my cheeks with to show his friends that my healthy color really was that of my natural skin, clean and unpowdered as it was. This handkerchief is my only possession.

I didn't know how to wash fabric properly, but washed dozens of sheets anyway, for various large camps. Each day, I would end up with emaciated hands. I looked out at the landscape through the broken glass. The sun had disappeared and the snow had turned dark pink and, in the areas of deepest shadow, it had even gone purple. Like that cottage cheese cake made with added raspberry juice – I thought – which Bill, on that occasion, didn't get to finish after his fight with the yellow parasol and the blue one – I laughed.

Then I realized there were two men behind me. Guards? Would they punish me just for looking through the window at the sunset? Would they tell me I was wool-gathering? I immediately got on with the task in hand.

"We've brought you more stuff to wash, can you handle that?" said the shorter one, the one who was wearing glasses, as he handed me a pile of dirty clothing.

"Of course she can, no problem, she's a worker, this one," said the taller man, who reminded me of the mounted Cossack in the picture in our museum at Arkhangelsk. Or maybe a Hussar, like the ones in period films. He introduced himself: "Boris Mikhailov. Borya to you. And this one here's Anatoly, or Tolya".

I turned to them, shook their hands and introduced myself. They had just had a bath, they smelt of soap, of cleanliness, and their bodies, here in this freezing weather, were giving off steam. Being next to them felt like being in a heated room. I took a step towards them; they took two towards me.

"Haven't been here long, have you?" Boris enquired.

I told them I'd arrived at the camp a few days ago, straight from prison:

"So how come you know I haven't been here long?"

"It's written all over you."

Tolya explained:

"The new ones aren't damaged goods. Life hasn't kicked them in the face that often. You'll see in a month from now how pitiful you'll look once they've put you through the wringer! Then you too, you'll spot the new ones coming in and see how they look like little chicks," he smiled, showing his gums.

He offered me a cigarette, I said no. Both men lit up. Boris, wreathed in smoke, asked me if I'd been sent here for theft. Before I could answer, Tolya showed his teeth again:

"This one killed her husband, and a good thing too, 'cos if she hadn't, right now he'd die of jealousy if he saw his beautiful lady wife here with us. And you'd see, at night, he'd turn into a proper Othello and he'd smother her, and us, too, with a pillow. So just in case, she did him in!"

"I'm a political, OK?" I corrected him, "Even though I haven't done anything. I haven't committed any crime."

"None of the political prisoners are ever guilty, they're all innocent as little lambs, right, Tolya?" Boris laughed, "We don't care, Valya. But Tolya's right, you're always going to have loads of jealous men swarming round you like flies."

"And loads of jealous women!" —Tolya added, as his mouth, when he laughed, twisted itself more and more towards his left ear. That made me feel friendly towards him: he looked like a kindly circus clown.

"A whole army of jealous women will tear out your eyes!" Boris said.

Just like the Furies in one of those plays I used to see in my first life, the first and last life, I thought, smiling. They were joking, of course, I wasn't planning on taking anyone's husband away from them, so why would any woman want to be jealous of me? Although... then I remembered Nina. That made me shiver.

"If I was a pretty girl," Boris went on, "it'd be better for me to get out of the camp altogether. Good looks can only bring you trouble: all the men want you and you don't want any of them, or at least not most of them, and women will be terribly jealous of you."

I knew what I looked like, and realized that this praise wasn't really being addressed to me. When they took us away on the train, in cattle trucks into

which they packed us like we were so many sacks of potatoes, as soon as we got here, they sent us off to get clean. Then they gave us the clothes that we would be forced to wear: high felt boots, three sizes too big, a problem I solved by wrapping my feet in rags, as we weren't allowed to wear socks; they also gave us trousers, a padded jacket and a cap with ear-flaps that was so big it fell down over my eyes. All the clothes they gave me were worn and full of holes. Even the boots. As work camp slang put it, they were thirty-times third-hand. I looked at myself in the window, because there were no mirrors: I looked like an astonished scarecrow; no, more ridiculous than that, far more repulsive. Who am I, what is my place here? I asked myself every night, before falling asleep. Am I a young actress, happy, unconcerned, attractive to many and sociable, or am I a disgraced, ragged prisoner, made hideous by the harsh conditions here? I shared this doubt with the two men.

"But your blue eyes," Boris said, "that nice, becoming little nose, your pink, round cheeks, your silky black curls, not even that horrible cap can hide that from us, it not being exactly the height of Parisian elegance and refinement, I think we can agree on that."

"And we've also got used to discerning the feminine form under that horrible *telogreika*," Tolya added.

"What's your job?" enquired Boris.

I told them that I'd been assigned to the brigade responsible for building work. I had to gather cement up with a spade, shovel it into buckets, then load the buckets onto a wagon and take them to the train, where I had to empty them into a boxcar. I did this for a few days and then couldn't go on. I didn't have any strength left. I didn't go to work and they put me in the punishment cell, where they didn't give me any food. Because of that I got really weak and under doctor's orders I was assigned to the laundry next to the bathhouse.

"You were lucky, they don't transfer people to the laundry very often. Most times they just let them rot, or die of hunger in the punishment cell or in jail, or they leave them to the mercy of the wolves. And another bit of luck, the way I see it, is that the person in charge of the laundry and the toilets is me," Boris said, "But what I meant was, what was your job was before you came here."

"I was a student at the Academy of Dramatic Art and had started to give performances at the Bolshoi Theatre in Arkhangelsk."

"Wow, a future actress!"

Tolya whistled in admiration. Boris's eyes opened wide.

2

In the evening, Boris took me to a large wooden hut with the words 'House of Culture' written on it. Three men and two women were already waiting for me there. I closed my eyes for a moment: I made an effort to forget where I was, to forget about the wolves too, though I couldn't get them out of my head, and to remember my beloved drama school. When, with a hefty dose of imagination, I transferred myself from the labor camp to the world of theatre and art –my prison rags even turned into dresses in the style my mother had made them for me, copied from fashion magazines – I started to recite Tatiana's letter from *Eugene Onegin* from memory, in a soft voice. Meanwhile I thought about Bill and let all my feelings come to the fore. I recited for a full quarter of an hour, even though to me, it seemed just a few minutes had passed:

I write to you - what would one more?

What else is there that I could say?

'Tis now, I know, within your will
to punish me with scorn.

But you, for my unhappy lot,
keeping at least one drop of pity,
you'll not abandon me.

(Translated by Vladimir Nabokov)

When I fell silent, nobody said anything for quite a while. Such was Pushkin's appeal. I realized that one of the girls had tears in her eyes, one of the men was blowing his nose for a suspiciously long time.

The next day we had to give a recital involving several different actors and musicians. During the performance, I noticed Boris's admiring stare; when it was over, he walked me back to the hut. Every evening there was a rehearsal, I

was exhausted when I turned up, after having worked for fourteen hours, my hands bleeding and painful, but was happy to be able to act; after the rehearsals Boris would take me back to my section's block.

3

On the way, we would stop at the bathhouse. All the fittings, the walls and ceiling, the bathtub and the showers, were covered in frost and ice and at night, the incoming moonlight added a cold splendour to this glassy marvel. The moon also lit up the exotic flowers, the exuberant vegetation and wild creepers drawn by the frost on the glass of the windows. We, who had nothing, became the queen and king of frost in a delicate crystal kingdom. Each time we passed, amazed, under these transparent ornaments of various shapes which hung from the showers and ceiling: all the steam and the water drops which, at night, had turned into frosty icicles. And when there was the tiniest puff of wind or powerful gust, the icicles shook like Christmas bells, like the pealing in an ancient temple, like beautiful musical instruments. That was our temple of snow, held up by fine white columns, there was a pale white table of blown glass on which we would sit so that Boris could heal my bleeding wounds with his check handkerchief, there was a bench of snow on which we would sit without noticing the cold.

That was where Boris told me his story:

"Once upon a time there was a mother who had a son. She loved him and was completely devoted to him."

Boris paused. Then he said:

"The mother protected her son as best she could, because she knew how cruel the world could be."

He looked at the icy walls. Then he went on:

"The son was quiet, calm, and when he was a little boy he was looked after by his mother. But later on, he started to find this motherly love off-putting because now he had other interests."

After a few moments of silence, he said:

"So when he was just a young man, he shut the door behind him and never went back home."

Then he added, in a voice so soft that I could barely hear him:

"Afterwards, his mother died, but he didn't know."

We became silent, for a while. I was thinking about my mother, a blonde beauty like a fairy-tale tsarina, but so delicate! And I thought about Bella, her dimples, about how every morning she would slowly pull at my hair and then I would tickle her until she filled the house with giggles. Then Boris said:

"So that's my life, Valya. There's been nothing else. If I knew how to write, I'd write a poem. And you would recite it."

"It is a poem, Boris. And I will recite it."

The following evening I started my recital with Boris's story; I dedicated the rest of the time to Pushkin's sonnets. I thought about my mother, and also about Bella. Everybody got emotional. And Boris the Cossack was wiping his eyes. From that time on, every night before reveille, I dreamt about my mother and my daughter. It was always the same dream: we were going home and before we got there, mother and Bella disappeared. I looked for them in vain, and that affected me so much that I would wake up in desperation.

One evening, while I was having my soup, I told all this to an old Siberian who people said had been locked up for being a shaman. As if it was the most natural thing in the world, he said that was a sign that something in my life would change, and that my mother or Bella would play a part in this.

I talked to the shaman about how wretched I felt, I who had done nothing, because I was so far away from my loved ones, in this hole full of misery, filth, barbarity and evil.

"You shouldn't look at things that way. You have been unjustly imprisoned. Here there are many people in your situation. But that is to your advantage. You didn't do anything, so you are morally stronger than the others. Make an effort not to look at the dirt. When spring comes, look at the shiny snow, the blue sky, the contrast between light and shadow, which is so great here. And now concentrate on the different shades of grey: there are bluish ones, others are pinkish. Take note too of the barbed wire and our run-down block huts, as if you were a photographer looking for a shot. You'll see that even in misery there is beauty. Pity the bad ones, because they are bad out of weakness. And look out for possible friends, people who are similar to you.

Because your friendship with them will be both for life and also in death, it is always that way when one is living in a state of disgrace."

At night I went straight to bed and thought about the art of seeing beauty. And of how my mother, more than Bella, would play some part in a change in my life. That night I had a pleasant dream: I was going back to my block hut, my hands bleeding from the work at the laundry, and when I crossed the threshold I found myself at home with mother and Bella, who started to hug me.

4

Was it a sign? One morning, the section chief told me that my mother had come to see me and that I'd been given permission for a half-hour's worth of conversation.

Mother told me things about Bella. For the whole of our interview, the Georgian overseer Leila stood present. Suddenly, my mother whispered something. I glanced at Leila, but she didn't see me, she was looking somewhere else.

"Valya," my mother muttered, "there's something I've been hiding from you. I was afraid you might have found out. But I can't sleep, I have to tell you. That's why I'm here. I don't feel well, my heart is beating in a strange way. Valya, when they shoot a woman's husband she never gets over it."

Then my mother confessed the secret. She did so when Leila's attention was caught by the woman next to me, who was slapping her husband - who'd come to see her - quite hysterically, weeping as she cried: "It's not true! It can't be true!" Just at that moment my mother whispered to me:

"Valya, Nina comes to the house almost every day. She brings me food and sometimes reads plays out aloud to me. She's rehearsing, so that she can become a good actress. She feels bad. Even though it wasn't her who informed on you. No, Valya, trust me, it wasn't her. They took Nina to the hearing by force and then made her declare against you so as to cover up for the real..."

"In that case, who did inform on me?" I interrupted. But Leila the guard was looking at us, so my mother had to talk about trivial things: about how Auntie Vera was doing a typing course. And I told her that an old shaman had

advised me to look for beauty all around me, because, according to him, beauty is everywhere, you only have to know how to find it. Mother nodded, thoughtful.

Later, when Leila had her eyes on other prisoners and their visitors, my mother briefly revealed something which, to a certain extent, changed my life. She confirmed that Bill's letters were genuine, that they hadn't been forged by the KGB. And that Bill had called me on the phone, that it wasn't possible to call me at home directly from the United States and that the call had been held up at an international telecommunications centre.

That split my life in two. One of my lives took place in the camp; the other one, the real one, existed inside me. I was kept alive by the idea that one day the nightmare would be over. In just over nine years, I'd be free. I would meet up again with Bella, I thought, I'd meet up with Bill, who was still trying to find me.

But the main reason for my mother's visit was quite different. As she was leaving, she asked me in a soft voice if I would have anything against her marrying again.

"With Vladimir Vladislavovich?", I asked coolly.

My mother nodded, looked at the floor. Perhaps a little harshly, I told her:

"I don't want a stepfather. They took my father, and I couldn't stand any kind of substitute."

Later, I thought that my mother shouldn't have given me that kind of power over her. She should just have gone ahead and done it.

I watched my mother's slightly hunched back as she went out.

5

"It was a sign!" I told the old shaman, later on, when I sat next to him so I could tell him about my mother's visit.

"But that isn't everything, not yet," he told me, once he'd heard me out, "The most important thing hasn't happened yet. And it won't necessarily be good news."

Then it happened. It was after a successful performance of Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades*, and after the night-time visit to the kingdom of ice, where Boris took care of the bleeding wounds on my hands, which with his

touch, at night, were cured and closed up like flowers, and in the morning, with soap and water, they opened up again like red water-lilies. That night, though, I was thinking about what my mother had come to tell me, and I took my hands away from Boris.

He looked at me, puzzled. Then he said:

"You've changed completely. What's happened to you, Valya?"

"I found something out, and I can't think about anything else."

He couldn't get anything more out of me. He grimaced. And while walking me to my block hut, he hunched his shoulders. It was pitch dark and I couldn't see his face.

I found a letter on my bed. At that time, nobody could send me any letters, so I got frightened: it's about Bella, something's happened to my daughter!; or maybe my mother fell ill on the journey back home? I opened the sheet of paper: it was a summons to the local branch of the KGB. Even though everyone had told me that the political police had probably upheld my case and would release me, I went there with my heart in my mouth.

We are walking across the snow in rows, watched by the guards and dogs. Here in the Far North, where they have transferred me, between Vorkuta and Kotlas, the sun never rises during the winter, the darkness lasts twenty-four hours a day. "That's for six months of the year," I am warned by a woman in my row. We don't talk much, we concentrate on walking; whenever there's the slightest of lulls, the Alsatians lunge at us, or the guards beat us, without warning, with their rifles, or they simply shoot at us. Once I've removed my huge mittens and placed my left hand in my pocket, I feel the folded handkerchief with my fingers. Boris gave it to me as a memento, it's the handkerchief he used to cure my bleeding fingers with. I barely had time to clean, dry and iron it, before leaving the camp.

Boris, by way of a farewell, in that palace of ice, had told me: "We won't see each other again." But I could only think that I'd never see Bill again. How could we ever meet, if they've sent me to a distant camp inside the Arctic Circle? It was the most logical thing in the world to assume we wouldn't see each other again. But I did see him, in my own way: at night I saw Bill surrounded by snow and ice; on his face there was nothing but his warm, white smile, dreamy and mischievous, and honest above all; and his eyes were like the sky of a baking hot night.

Why didn't I say to Boris that, on the day my mother came to visit me and they allowed us to meet, I found out something so important that it altered all my expectations, my behaviour, my life? Why didn't I tell him that my mother had given me some news of Bill? I march in the darkness, in the iciness, among dozens of slaves like me and I make an effort to answer the question. Why? A guard shouts at somebody. At me. He hits my shoulder with his rifle. At that moment that I shudder from a pain so cruel that it shoots through me like an electric shock, and my vision blurs to the extent that my fellow marchers have to hold me to stop me from falling, in that precise moment I know why I didn't want to share my mother's news with anybody. Because it's my secret. And secrets have to be buried in the deepest part of the earth. Or locked up inside oneself with ten bolts of iron and guarded jealously. Now I am walking ten kilometres, over large heaps of snow, to get to work, where, every day, for at least ten hours we place railway sleepers, and then I have to march ten kilometres back to my block. But I carry a secret with me, I feel like a locked safe, I am full of precious treasures, and that makes me strong.

7

Dear Mama,

I think all the time of Bella and you, how you're getting on at home, and wonder if Bella remembers her mother. My daughter is growing up and I can't see it happening, we don't play with the building set or with her teddy bear with its bare, stout little belly and round eyes, the one my father gave me when I was five. It wasn't so long ago that I was still playing with it, do you remember that, mom?

Of course, I can't send you this note from the camp. In the letters which we send officially, we have to praise everything: we're just fine, we have everything we need...stuff like that. I still don't really know how I'm going to get it to you, maybe I'll manage to give it to someone who's going back home after completing their sentence, or to one of the visitors, so that they can take it out, hidden in their underwear, although that's as risky for me as it would be for them. I'd prefer just to put the message in a bottle and let it sail down the Dvina in the spring. Or maybe I could send it by carrier pigeon?

Immediately after you left, they called me over to the KGB so that I could identify a corpse. They wanted me to state that the cadaver in question belonged to a certain Fyodor Ivanovich Punin. But I couldn't possibly have recognized that corpse, its face was completely smashed and bloody. The guards must have beaten him with the butt of a machine-gun, or his fellow prisoners did that to him. The ones who are here for robbery or murder, in fact, are a terrifying bunch, the best thing is to steer well clear of them. But when they turn on somebody, you can't get away from them. They hate politicals and play all kinds of nasty tricks on us. They know that physically they're stronger than we are, and above all that they can do anything to the so-called enemies of the people and the fatherland, and they'll get away with it. It seems to be, mother, that this camp is a lethal place: you can't begin to imagine the amount of people that die here! And not just from long hours of hard labor, from the harsh conditions and the poor food, but rather, above all, from the treatment we receive, from the way the guards humiliate us and the way we humiliate each other. What happens is this: each prisoner looks for someone weaker than they so as to live at that person's expense, to exploit that person, to turn him into their slave. The ones who have the worst time of it are the elderly, who are dying like flies here. In the camp where I am now, at the Kozya Station, close to Konosha, in the Vorkuta-Kotlas region, there are more political prisoners than any other kind: Lithuanians, Estonians and Latvians. They sent me here after I refused to identify someone I didn't know, threatening me. I thought of you, who would never have given in to their blackmail, and of Bill as well, who always spoke his mind, even if that meant hurting someone's feelings.

So I'm far away, beyond the Arctic Circle, you couldn't make it out here, darling mother, don't even try. I'm worried about your health, I often dream

about you. As I said before, most of the prisoners are here courtesy of Law 58, meaning that they're politicals and that's why the regime is especially harsh and tough with them.

My life is over, all happiness is finished. I live only on memories, I'm nineteen years old and I feel like an old lady, whose life is over. Now I can see that you're young when you make plans for the future and when this future is a mystery that both attracts and scares you. When you don't feel that anymore, it means you're old.

Mother, marry Vladimir Vladislavovich. In your place I'd do the same; that way you'll have someone you can depend on. I see so many things differently from the way I did before! And I have to admit that it saddens me, not to have anybody like you here.

They've put me in the Vasilyev brigades. Vasilyev was one of General Vlasov's officers. Talking of which, do you know what happened to General Vlasov, mother? During the war, he led the anti-Communist movement in Germany, recruiting Soviet prisoners of war and civilian deportees. In May of 1945 he gave himself up to the Americans. But they handed him over to the Soviet authorities, who executed him. I have to ask Bill about all this sometime, mother; I can't understand how his country, which he thinks the world of, could do something so barbaric. You, who were born in a palazzo and have lived through so many twists and turns of history, the Revolution and the Civil War, can you understand it? I find it terribly sad.

Vasilyev sent Rita Panfilova and me to cut down trees. Do you remember Rita, mother? She went to the International Club too, and came to our house a couple of times. Rita told me she knows who informed on me, but she didn't want to tell me because she was afraid of him or her. It seems this person informs on anybody just to get hold their apartment and then hand it over to his or her cronies. And it isn't Nina. I've heard a rumor that she's been taken into custody as well. Is that true? That worries me, she's not at all practical and is always falling ill. But no, I'm sure the rumor can't be true.

Neither me nor Rita had the faintest idea of how to work as lumberjacks, so over the entire day we only did one tree. It was a tall pine, first we cut into it with a handsaw, which went really slowly, and to make matters worse it made me sad to see the saw cutting into this living thing, I felt as much pity for the

pine as if I'd been cutting into myself. In the end I pretended to saw, while making an effort not to cause any pain to the tree. So Rita was the only one doing any work. Afterwards, the pine started to fall slowly, but it wasn't clear which way it was going to go. Rita and I were jumping all over the place like little goats. When it hit the ground, we tried to drag it away, but the branches got tangled up with the surrounding trees and we couldn't budge the thing. We realized we had to cut off the branches, but it was already too late. The brigade overseer was shouting at us furiously, because we hadn't met our quota. We laughed at him behind his back, we smelt of fresh wood and were sticky with aromatic pitch and sniffed each other like dogs, we couldn't get enough of that clean, pure, soothing smell of the forest.

The following day, by way of a punishment we were given half-rations of bread and no supper.

That day they gave me the job of picking up large pine branches and burning them on a bonfire. I threw the branches into the fire, and while they burned, I sat up close. Later a man sniffed the air like a dog and shouted: "Something's on fire!". Then I realized that one of the burning pine branches had fallen onto my padded trousers. First it just made a hole, but in a fraction of second it spread to the rest of my clothes. Everybody threw themselves at me, trying to put out the fire. Since then I've been walking around in burnt rags. On my way to work and when there, I felt colder than ever. Every day I came back absolutely shattered, hungry and frozen.

It was unbearable. I refused to go to work.

They put me in the punishment cell. Almost without any food. Freezing cold, night and day. Without sleeping, because there was no bed. When I came back to the block, three days later, the brigade overseer Vasilyev refused to accept me. He sent me out to cut sticks: for fourteen hours a day I had to work like a robot. Just the thought of having to keep on working like this, made me panic. How could I last out my ten years? I often thought of the words spoken by the old shaman, remember?, who had advised me that even when I was on my last legs I should never stop looking for something of beauty around me. But I was so exhausted that I didn't have the energy or the wish to do that, and so just couldn't.

Reluctantly, grudgingly, I ended up getting used to camp life. There was just one thing I never got used to and never want to get used to: becoming a slave and working fourteen hours a day, like a machine.

So, I kept on refusing to go to work. After each refusal, they would send me the punishment cell, where I suffered from cold, hunger, and lack of sleep. I became a *dokhodiaga*, a horse ready for the knacker's yard, as starving prisoners are called in camp slang. I faced up to the fact that I was going to die: better that than live like a slave! Now I'm back in the punishment cell, mother, and I've declared a hunger strike. It's the third day that I've been back in here, and I haven't touched one bite of food.

I don't know when you'll get this letter. I don't know if I'll get out of here alive. If I don't, perhaps some kind soul will get this letter out of the camp, to freedom, and send it to your address.

Kisses. Forgive me.
Your Valya.

8

Dear Mama,

I'm writing to you quickly, to put you at ease after my last letter. When I was at the end of my tether and about to die, they took me to the hospital. There wasn't a bed free, so the doctor put two beds together and placed me between two sick women. There were three of us in the two beds.

Some days after having been brought to the hospital, a pregnant girl turned up to say goodbye to a woman friend of hers from Belarus. She told us that she was going off with a transport of pregnant women to the Talagi camp. Her friend asked: "Who are you going to leave your Grisha Larin to?" The girl looked around the room and pointed to me: "To this pretty girl!"

When she'd left, I asked her friend who Grisha Larin was and I found out that she was talking about a brigade overseer; that girl had been his sweetheart, and he'd got her pregnant. I didn't agree:

"What have I got to do with all this? I don't even know him, and it's the first time I've seen her!"

"But his girlfriend has passed this man on to you," the Belorussian girl said, "there's nothing you can do about it."

I protested:

"But I don't want him! I make my own choices!"

And in front of everybody I swore I'd have nothing to do with this stranger.

"You certainly are going to get to know him, and really well too, you'll see!" predicted the Belorussian girl, and I hated her for that.

Once I'd got some of my strength back, I had to leave the hospital and go back to the block. There, I found out that they'd transferred me to Grisha Larin's brigade. I couldn't believe it. And now, what? Another Belorussian girl whose name was Masha came up to me and started to tell me about Larin:

"Look, he's the brigade overseer. He'll help you to survive. And that's what matters most!"

I told her that I wouldn't allow anybody to lure me into a trap. And that I didn't want Larin and that was that.

I've started work on Larin's brigade as a woodcutter. I can't help but notice that this muscular young man with his blonde moustache is considerate towards me and sends me to spots where there's less snow and gives me jobs which are not too difficult. In the evening, he sometimes makes sure I get a little sausage or a bread roll, these being donations he gets from the Lithuanians and Estonians; from time to time they get food packages sent from home. I'm in an unpleasant situation. On the one hand, I can't possibly pick a fight with the brigade overseer, on the other hand, I find the man repulsive. He isn't a political, he ended up here for theft and who knows what else. The idea that a thief could become my lover horrifies and disgusts me. And besides, is it possible to accept a man who is foisted on you? This whole business is beneath my dignity.

So that's everything for today, dear mother. Lots of kisses to you and Bella. Does my little girl still remember me? Write to me about her. Let her send me a drawing!

Yours, Valya

Despite everything, there were things I didn't tell her, so as not to make her worry. For example, that Masha was still having a go at me:

"If you don't become his sweetheart, he'll ask you to work as if you were an experienced woodcutter."

And I went on protesting:

"Then I'll go on hunger strike again. I'm experienced enough at that."

And Masha:

"I'm warning you, Valya. If you don't do it of your own accord, you'll do it anyway whether you like it or not."

That scared me:

"He can't rape me!"

"That's what you think. Not only can he rape you, that's exactly what he'll do. As well as doing you all the extra harm he can."

"I'd complain to the camp administration."

"They'd laugh at you," Masha said, bitterly.

I saw that she was trying to give me this advice for my own good.

"They'll be on his side," she said, "Or they'll rape you too, a whole gang of men. That's happened here. And you wouldn't survive that, Valya, I can tell you that for sure!"

9

Dearest mother,

I've finally managed to send you the letters, but haven't received any reply from you. I don't know if you're getting my messages, but I'm going to keep on writing to you anyway. Bear in mind that I write to you often, and if I don't have paper or pencil, I address myself to you mentally during the day, on the long walks to the workplace, the whole while. I almost always end up out of breath and you are my refuge. What is Bella up to? Write me a nice long letter about the things she says, about if she plays with other children, if she asks after her mother. And how is your fibrillation?

I also think about Bill all the time. You can't imagine to what extent you changed my life when you told me what you did, at our last meeting.

With tender kisses for you and Bella,
Your Valya

10

Dear mother,

Do you remember that I wrote to you about the brigade overseer, who merely bothered me in the beginning, but then started harassing me directly with his overtures? When he realized that I was ignoring him, this Grisha Larin made me do the hardest jobs. On my own, I learnt to cut firewood and trees, I didn't have time to think of those trees with tenderness anymore, because my life depended on cutting them down. But I'm not cut out to be a woodcutter and I couldn't do the work properly. As a punishment, he reduced my daily food rations by half, and even the normal amount is too little given the energy that's expended during twelve or fourteen hours of hard labor every day, as well as the long walk to and from work. I knew he was blackmailing me and that he was capable of killing me to get what he wanted. So I pretended to agree to go with him.

At night, Larin took me to his block hut. In the communal bed he made a private space, hanging sheets around his spot as if they were curtains. He invited me and Masha to the table, and offered us the remains of what the Estonians had given him. I'd told myself I wouldn't speak to him. I answered his questions with cold nods or shakes of the head. Masha left. I lay down in the bed and kept on repeating to myself: "I don't want this, go away!" The whole time. I tried to think of Bill, of his considerateness, his sincerity, his affection. And do you know what? Maybe this cast a curse over Larin, I don't know. I only know that he couldn't consummate the act, no matter how hard he tried, despite all his passion; it really tormented him. That muscular Larin ended up feeling like an absolute failure.

You see, mother, sometimes I have the feeling that there must be some kind of justice in the world. Not a worldly or human type of justice, but some other kind.

Kisses to you and my little one

from your Valya

11

Dear Mama,

I haven't written to you for a long time, though in my imagination I do so all the time. I thought you couldn't have received my letters. I always give them to someone who's being released, but that doesn't happen very often. Every time the person leaving promises me that she'll keep them, that she'll take them to freedom and make sure they get to you. And now you've replied! You write saying that since they took father away, you know for sure that there is no such thing as justice. You were right to phrase it in a subtle way that only I could understand. This type of message is strictly prohibited here. If anybody found out, something could happen to you, too. And I couldn't stand that, I couldn't stand the idea of you being taken off, so warm-hearted, so fragile, so ill, and being put in a hell-hole like the one I'm living in.

I agree with you, mother. There is no such thing as justice. Absolutely not! After supper, in the block hut, I look at the women around me. There's about a hundred of us, of different ages and in different states of health, and we've been brought here from the four corners of the earth. Whether we be innocent or guilty, we're all treated the same. Sometimes I think about it, when I leave the building for a moment and look at the sunset. Here, in the north, on the tundra, the sunsets are wonderful. The setting sun casts a pink light over everything and makes the world look like a delightful place which it would really be worth living in. Given that everything in nature is harmonious, animals only do what they have to do when they devour each other, they do so to feed themselves, not out of cruelty. However, in the world created by mankind we find barbarity at every corner, wicked intentions, evil, and outright injustice. If you only knew how much baseness there is all around me! How many wretches there are in the world! Do you remember how credulous and idealistic I was when I was young? I was so innocent that I believed people, believed in people. Now life has shown me the truth. Notice that I've written "when I was young". I have the feeling that my youth was over a long time ago, and I'm not yet twenty.

Do you know what I sometimes dream, mother? That I was with Bill in my little apartment room in Arkhangelsk. Bill says to me: "So, tonight?". And I know he's talking about the suicide we will commit together; we've decided that we'll die together. I say yes, and I leave the room, I go and look for you in the kitchen, I give you a big hug and whisper in your ear: "Mother, I don't want to die!". And you say to me: "No, you mustn't die, you won't die, my love". And then I wake up.

I don't know what this dream means, nor why it recurs again and again.

You are always in my thoughts, mother, as is Bella. I'm happy that my little girl has got over her 'flu and is running about again.

Lots of kisses and hugs.

Your Valya

12

Dear Mama,

Last Saturday there was a dance in the canteen. Those prisoners who knew how to play an instrument brought them along and played something for us. I was wearing the light grey dress I left home in, do you remember it, Mama? Whatever happened to Bill's insignia, that I gave to Bella for her to play with? If she's still got it, even though she might not show it off to anybody, it has got 'US Navy' written on it, and could still get you two in trouble. Can you see how I've changed, Mama? Before I wore that insignia as if it were a piece of jewellery, so that everyone could see it; the fact that Bill gave it to me had turned it into something to be treasured. And now I'm as fearful as a little old lady.

Though not really! Now I'm going to tell you something which will show you that Valya knows how to look after herself, that nobody's a match for her! You'd

be amazed! I'm going to write it down like it was a novel, with dialogue, which is how I've got used to writing to you:

After the dance, I took the dress to the locker, where I put it on a hanger and smoothed it down with care. A few days later, when I was in bed, dog-tired after work, a friend, Tamara, came to see me:

"Hi, Valya. You're going to be a rich woman. Zinaida Mefodievna wants to buy the dress you were wearing at the dance."

I could have done with the money, I could have exchanged it for something to eat and so stop wandering about everywhere like a famished pauper. No! How could I even have contemplated that? This is the dress I wore when I was free, you made it for me, Mama, using one of Papa's suits, Bill touched it when he pinned the insignia on its lapel, the insignia Bella still plays with...

"No way, Tamara, I'm not selling that dress no matter what the price!"

I didn't say why. I'd got used by then to not revealing any personal information to my friends. I'm writing to you alone, Mama, you are my confidante and confessor.

"Have you really thought this over, Valya? You know that somebody would have to be a complete lunatic to get on the wrong side of the senior doctor, because that person would never be given any more sick leave or even be recognized as being sick."

"I know that, Tamara, but there's simply nothing to be done. This dress means a lot more to me than if it were mere clothing. You can tell Zinaida Mefodievna that I would love to sell it, but that this dress has sentimental value, for me."

"Message received, so I'll pass it on. But Zinaida Mefodievna will be furious."

"Tell her what it means to me."

"Of course I will. But you'd better make sure you don't fall sick again, that doctor's as bloody-minded as they come!"

I stopped thinking about it. I could hardly have done otherwise, given that during the next few days they assigned me to a particularly tough job. When we marched back to our hut after the first day, I stumbled a couple of times. The guard was on the point of setting the dog on me, and when, a moment later, it

happened again, he was about to shoot me for attempting to escape. I don't know how I got through it alive.

Not long after, a transport arrived with new prisoners. They weren't political, it's easy to deal with the politicals, they're intelligent, subtle, sensitive. These were regular criminals, thieves, murderers and so forth, and they hate the politicals: they play all kinds of dirty tricks on us, and make us do their every bidding, by main force. On Saturday after work there was a recital of songs and poems and as I was the moderator, I put on my light grey dress. I got back to the hut too late to take to dress to the locker, which was already closed, so I hung it up over my bed. In the morning I got up early, before reveille, and saw the dress had gone. I asked the night lookout, but she didn't know what had happened, she swore she hadn't seen anyone come into the hut. Suddenly, I had a revelation. Like someone possessed, like a madwoman, I made straight for the shoe workshop and got hold of a long, sharp, pointy knife. And with this knife I ran to the place where the recent arrivals from the transport were being held. I found out who their leader was: a thief going by the ridiculous nickname of Ninka Moscow.

She was in bed. I crept up to her, keeping the knife behind my back. I looked her straight in the eyes:

"Give me the dress, you miserable bitch!" I screamed.

She started to try and talk her way out of it.

"Give me the dress, you cow!"

She began to look around for help.

I put the knife to her throat:

"Shut up and give me the dress! Right now, you're going to put it back right where it belonged. Have you got that, you stupid tart?"

Ninka looked at me, her eyes wide open. She nodded.

I returned the knife to the workshop. The next morning, the dress was in its place.

That's a Valya you don't know, right, Mama? I don't even recognize myself, me who used to blush whenever I heard someone swear. Am I still myself? Or have my circumstances turned me into someone else? I can't stop asking myself who I am. Will you recognize me at all, when we see each other again?

Hugs and kisses to you both,

Your Valya

13

Dear Mama,

When Ninka gave me back the dress I spent the entire day asking myself, as I worked, what I should do with it. An inner voice whispered: "Now that it's been in the clutches of that thief, the dress won't bring me any more good luck. Give it away, its charm is gone!" So then I didn't hesitate to sell the dress to the doctor.

My instincts proved to be correct: with the money I got from the doctor I bought food, got some strength back and recovered somewhat. The doctor was so grateful, she assigned me to the hospital building as her personal secretary. Which is how I turned into a person of influence! All of a sudden, I was responsible for people's fate, and plenty made an effort to get into my good graces. The doctor had the job of deciding which work category would be assigned to each prisoner, and so I, as her secretary, registered each category on a form. At once, I found out loads of things about each prisoner and learnt something new, Mama: knowledge is power. I'd never realized it before, because I'd never been so close to a position of power.

But, you know what, Mama? People are malicious and envious. Somebody grassed to the camp administrators about how I'd got to my comfy position. They immediately sent me to work on the railway. And it's two hours to get there and two hours to get back, every day.

Mama, I'm including a letter for Nina. I haven't got her address, so please find it out and send her this letter, but read it beforehand.

I think about you and Belochka loads and send you both a thousand kisses

Your Valya

15

Summer arrived. It was light day and night, only in the small hours did the sky dye itself with violet tints before quickly giving free rein to the sun, which

slowly made an effort to unstick itself from the horizon, above which it then remained for some twenty hours. Nobody knew when it was day and when night, we didn't sleep and collapsed from exhaustion like flies at the end of summer. I every day there were heaps of huge, hairy mosquitoes, which, though they don't sting as much as the smaller ones, are quite revolting. And at night, they turned into sort of fuzzy angels that buzzed around my head. All told, the nights were somewhat quieter, the insects didn't wreak as much havoc as usual.

Yet again, they posted me to a different camp to do different work with different people. Part of our punishment also involved constantly having to get used to new people, with their various foibles and different habits and there was nothing we could but take it on the chin, which in such extremely difficult conditions, as not just exhausting but feels like a superhuman task.

I was assigned to the brick factory. Working next to me was a tall, good-looking blonde man, visibly older than me. He introduced himself and kissed my hand, as if we both were not just two dirty, lice-ridden, hungry and sleepy wrecks, wrapped in rags, who, for fourteen hours a day, were hammering away at bricks together, but rather were relaxed, perfumed young people, who had met each other at a reception, she in a cocktail dress and with a glass of champagne in her hand, and he in a dark suit with a silvery bowtie:

"Heino Ilmer".

"Valentina Grigoryevna Iyevleva. A pleasure to meet you. Your name's the same as that of a well-known Estonian composer."

"That's me," he said, and I got the impression he was blushing.

Anatoly Vanieyev, Heino's neighbour in the factory, entered the conversation. The three of us went off to the canteen together and soon we became inseparable. Once I recited several poems of mine to them, which I composed for pleasure before going to sleep or on the long walks to and from the workplace, so as to keep my mind occupied in some way. Heino Ilmer hesitantly offered to set them to music. They were then performed during our Saturday concerts. I convinced Anatoly to recite Derzhavin. Standing before the audience, his shirt unbuttoned, his bass voice boomed as he gesticulated with both hands:

*I am a king, I am a slave,
I am a worm, I am God,*

And we all understood that he really was both king and God, although the camp did all it could to turn him into a slave and a worm. Suddenly we realized we were all kings and gods, no matter how hard the camp tried to stamp on us as if we were worms and force us to take on the hardest of tasks as if we were slaves in irons. We gave a round of applause to Derzhavin and to Anatoly. But above all, to all of us, and each one of us, to him or herself.

16

The thirty-first of December. During work, Heino invited me to a little New Year's party. I knew I'd have to sneak out of my hut, which was locked down at ten pm. I told Heino he could count on me. I made a dummy out of rags, placed it in my bed, and covered it with the blanket. Then I jumped over the barrier and ran to the entrance, where Heino, Anatoly and a few others were waiting for me. We stole along the streets, a girl slipped on the ice and twisted her ankle, but didn't say a word and, courageous, headed on through the night.

We were welcomed by the warmth and the shadow-and-light play of candles, which had been sent, especially for the occasion, by Anatoly's parents, from Leningrad; they had thrown in a sponge cake, nougat and apple strudel with walnuts. From Estonia, Heino had been sent pork and goose lard; we smeared this on bread which had been brought by his roommate, and sliced with a country bread knife. We accompanied the banquet with hot water that had several tea leaves and some sugar in it. At midnight, we toasted and hugged, then sung and recited poems. I gave them a rendering of:

*It's a long way to Tipperary,
it's a long way from home...*

playing a guitar someone had brought along. I couldn't have imagined the effect this song would have on me. I started to cry like a little girl: first they took Bill away from me, who I will never see again as long as I live, then they separated me from my daughter and mother. They forced me, violently, to interrupt my studies and to be under the constant vigilance of armed guards

and their dogs. I am twenty years old and see no future before me, I feel old, I can think only of death.

"You can't know the future for sure, Valya" Anatoly told me, "You've only a few more years left in the camp; they'll pass by, and life will start again."

"What life? My daughter won't even recognize me. I get the feeling that Bella has forgotten me."

"A child never forgets its mother, ever!" said Heino.

"She was tiny when they hauled me out of my house that autumn night and locked me up, she was only two. I have a hunch that if we ever meet again, Bella will have changed, as if she had never even been my daughter."

"Don't go putting any stock on hunches, Valya" Anatoly chided me, as he served more hot water, "You'd disappoint me," he wagged a menacing finger. "We are rational beings. *Homo sapiens sapiens.*"

"Dreams and hunches have never let me down," I said, feeling tired, "When they took my father away one morning, the previous night I'd dreamt three men had entered the house wearing helmets and medieval armor and I woke up, terrified. My dreams can predict the future."

"Uh-huh. And what have you been dreaming about recently? Are you going to let us into the secret?" Anatoly whispered, somewhat facetiously: he was pretending not to break the mysterious spell of the moment, yet made it clear that he didn't believe there was any kind of secret to be revealed.

"I don't really know. When I close my eyes, I can't see my mother. I think I'm going to lose her." I was whispering too, but for a different reason from that of Anatoly; I was afraid that if I said it aloud, it would come true.

"You are just calling out in vain to someone who doesn't exist," he said, realizing at once that this was exactly what he shouldn't have said. To dispel the unpleasantness he'd made everybody feel, he added, quickly, by way of a joke:

"What about your daughter's father, don't you see him in your dreams, either? That wouldn't be a bad thing, eh, lads? Maybe Valya has finally stopped dreaming about the American sailor in his white uniform, then finally we'll be in with a chance!"

Someone in the shadows picked up on the joke:

"Valya, say I were to dress up as sailor in white, would you pay any attention to me?"

Heino made as if he hadn't heard this last comment. He looked at me, questioningly.

I answered, for him alone:

"When I close my eyes, I see Bill somewhere, surrounded by fog. But it isn't a clear image, I can barely make it out."

I remembered vividly what Mama had told me the last time we saw each other, when she'd visited the camp. That Bill, after leaving Arkhangelsk, had been looking for me. By phone, maybe also in other ways. Here and now, at this New Year's party, I knew for sure that the letters the inspector had shown me during the interrogation were not fakes. They were the letters Bill had written and sent to me.

"Bill in his white uniform?" a male voice laughed from out of the darkness. I paid no attention.

"Do you want to know how I see him, in my dreams? I see Bill looking at me," I said, quiet, thoughtful, "Nobody's got eyes like his: blue like when a storm threatens. He looks at me, then turns and leaves."

The others were quiet, someone started to strum the guitar and sing one of Yesenin's poems, softly. Lena, who'd twisted her ankle, offered to read my palm. I didn't feel like it. It scared me. But when I saw that the others really thought this would be a worthwhile distraction, that they were looking at me inquisitively, encouragingly, I gave in and, without really wanting to, offered Lena my hand.

"Ahead of you is a life full of changes, adventure, hope and disappointment, Valya."

That frightened me.

"Don't look at me as if I'd just started World War Three. I can see from your hand that your life will be long and interesting, that's all."

"What about the changes and disappointments?" I asked, still scared.

"You will meet people and be separated from them, you will know happiness and grief, and will make friends and enemies. Including female enemies, and then some!"

"But you could say that about any woman, Lena," Heino said, gently.

"You're right, but Valya will have all this in spades. Life will try to consume her. It'll always be doing that. But Valya is strong and will be able to see the

beautiful side of everything. Another person would be broken by this kind of existence, but in her case, life will be appreciated to the full."

"This prophecy strikes me as being most odd. You're not being specific," Anatoly said, yawning.

"I could be specific, but I don't want to be," Lena said in her defence, "I see that Valya can sense intuitively who will disappear from her life and who will remain."

"Heino's right: what you've said is valid for everybody," Anatoly shook his head.

But I nodded, slowly, to myself. I had always thought my life would be something like that. My mother had also told me just that, the night they took me away. Lena read my palm well.

Somebody knocked on the door. We fell silent. Each person frozen in the middle of whatever he or she was doing: Heino with the plate of smeared bread that he was offering to us, Lena with an unlit match that she was about to light a new candle with, Anatoly with his index finger raised, having just cut himself off in the middle of fresh joke. We looked at each other, shocked. There followed several hard, noisy blows.

17

Anatoly slowly recovered from the shock, and lowered his arm. He gestured to me to hide myself and went to open the door.

I quickly dived under the table. Between the others' legs, I saw Anatoly put on his coat, go out, and close the door behind him.

Heino hid me behind a huge barrel of yeast which Anatoly's roommate used for making bread. Lena hid there as well.

After a minute or so, Anatoly came in with a guard. I crouched behind the barrel, quiet as a mouse, I didn't so much as breathe and had to make an effort to stop my teeth chattering, because this far from the stove heater an icy wind was blowing through the cracks in the wall of the block hut. It must have been early morning, almost. From the conversation, I realized that someone had found the rag doll in my bed and was looking for me. Anatoly offered the guard

a slice of bread smeared with lard and the guard took it. Anatoly assured him that he hadn't seen me, the guard said he believed him, and left.

18

Early on, in my block hut, they woke me up before reveille. The first thing I thought was: my mother used to say that whatever you do on the first of January, you will go on doing that same thing all year long. The guard shouted out that I had left my block hut, and that in my bed, instead of me they had found a kind of scarecrow in my place, and that they were treating the whole episode as an escape attempt.

"What escape attempt? I'm sleeping quietly in my bed, aren't I?"

But the guard didn't listen to me. He shouted:

"We're going to transfer you today" he shouted, "We're going to send you to another camp, you'll see how you like it there!"

After New Year's Eve I still hadn't lost my good humour and thought that if my mother's saying was true, all year long I would walk, after staying up all night, fifty kilometres to some unknown place, probably some very bleak place, far from the friends I'd made in the last few months.

There were only women in the new camp. Many of them were pregnant, they'd been brought here from various other camps. The first thing I noticed was the coldness of the block huts. There was obviously no heating in this camp. Outdoors, all day long we were at thirty degrees below zero, forty-five at night, and on top of that the wind blew furiously and inside the block huts the temperature was ten below freezing. During the day we went to the forest to work as woodcutters, even the pregnant ones. At each step we sunk into the snow that reached above our knees, almost halfway up our thighs and often up to our waists or higher. We were forever helping each other out of the snow. In the morning, instead of the usual – and insufficient – four hundred grams of bread, we were given two hundred. There was no soup, just reheated water. A world of pain and suffering; and all around us the stunning beauty of the forest!