

Stanislav Aseyev

THE
TORTURE CAMP
ON PARADISE STREET



Translated by
Zenja Tompkins
and Nina Murray



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TRANSLATORS' NOTE

The following is a personal memoir of Stanislav Aseyev's two and a half years in illegal captivity, most of it at the site of the defunct insulation factory, Izoliatsiia (Isolation), in the city of Donetsk.

A native of Makiivka and subsequent resident of Donetsk, Stanislav—or Stas, as his friends call him—was a young writer and journalist in 2014 when Russia invaded some areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and fomented a separatist movement there. After Russia orchestrated the creation of the two pseudo-republics—the “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DPR) and the “Luhansk People’s Republic” (LPR)—Stas devoted much of his energies to writing dispatches from occupied Donetsk for Ukrainian media under the pen name Stas Vasin. These missives about the developments on the ground as the separatist warlords were taking over the city were recently published in English in the collection entitled *In Isolation: Dispatches from Occupied Donbas*, trans. by Lidia

Wolanskyj (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2022).

On May 11, 2017, Stas was kidnapped for his reporting by DPR militants. Through June 28, 2017, he was held in a solitary cell in the basement of the Office (*kontora*), a temporary holding facility of the DPR's so-called Ministry of State Security.

On June 28, 2017, he was moved to the Isolation facility in Donetsk. That modern-day concentration camp is located at 3 Svitlyi Shliakh Street—meaning the Shining Path, a Soviet propaganda trope about achieving the elusive promised land of Communism (accordingly translated here as Paradise Street). There he spent the first two days (June 28–30) in a regular cell. After that, he was moved to Isolation's basement for the month of July 2017.

From August 2017 through October 31, 2019, he was held in the general prison cells of Isolation.

On November 1, 2019, Stas was moved to Donetsk Central Jail and then was held from November 18 to December 29, 2019, in the Makiivka Penal Colony. It was from here that he was released to his freedom in a prisoner exchange between the DPR, the LPR, and the government of Ukraine.

In total, Stas spent 969 days in captivity, of which 875 days he was kept in Isolation, the DPR's illicit torture camp on "Paradise Street" described in the following pages.

BACKGROUND

Izoliatsiia is the name of a defunct insulation factory that became a secret prison in the Russian-controlled part of Donbas. It is being used as a modern-day concentration camp and is referred to as “Isolation” throughout this book.

Hundreds of people have passed through Isolation. Most of them have survived torture by electric shock, rape, humiliation, and heavy forced labor.

Several inmates are known to have been murdered.

No human rights or humanitarian organizations have access to Isolation’s prisoners.

At the time of this book’s writing, in 2020, Isolation continues to operate. It is overseen by the Federal Security Bureau of the Russian Federation (FSB).

Denys Kulykovskiy (Palych), the prison’s supervisor and the main perpetrator of crimes committed there, was arrested in Kyiv on November 9, 2021, in part thanks to my own efforts.

FOREWORD

Smoke from the furnaces of
Sachsenhausen and Auschwitz settles
onto the ice of Magadan and Kolyma.

—The Vayner Brothers,
*A Moose and a Rock
in the Tall Green Grass*

To this day I'm not sure I have found the right words: the range of my experiences has been too immense. Between the crackle of a plastic bottle that sent an entire basement full of men to their feet and the classical music that played on the radio on the relatively quiet days, we lived a lifetime. How can that be explained? Does the music mean that, at this very moment, other men aren't kneeling on the floor of that same basement with black bags over their heads? It doesn't.

This book is about a secret prison in the very heart of Donetsk. People called it the "Donetsk Dachau." Those who have passed through it and survived will read this as more than a prison story. What happened

in Isolation—the name under which the prison became known—goes beyond all reason, even for Russian-occupied Donbas, a place where one wouldn't expect anything but violence. Even after months of freedom, I still ask myself: did all of that really happen? Could the things I experienced really have happened—to me? Those people; the electric shock, torture, and duct tape; the collective singing to drown out the screams of those at the end of the electrical wires...

I intended this book as pure reporting. I wanted to document what I had personally seen, without judgment or emotion—as if I had gone to Isolation as a journalist, not as a prisoner. In the twenty-eight months I spent there, I wrote a handful of texts that fit that original intent. I had to write quickly, in as few words as possible, sketching what would eventually become this book: I knew I could be discovered, my writing confiscated and read at any moment. In fact, that's exactly what happened.

Once free, however, I realized that I couldn't merely report: the memory of it all still overwhelms me all these months after my release. That's why some chapters may seem cold and cynical, while others may read like a desperate scream.

When I began writing this book, I had no inkling of the questions it would raise—for me, personally—and when I finished, I still couldn't believe that I had failed to answer a single one of them. Perhaps the book itself is the answer: in order to write it, I first had to survive. And in order to survive, I had to believe I would write it.

In the strange labyrinths of the mind, you feel blindly for any kind of meaning—*this happened for a reason, there must be a purpose*—but this adds up to a few sentences, a paragraph at best.

The cursor blinks, the words stop coming, and you sink back down to the deep, dark bottom. In Isolation you learn that there's no rock bottom; you can always sink even lower. There's always someone who has it worse than you do. This book is about that, too.

If I had to describe everything that that place is in one word, it would be *inevitability*. Here's why: when you're placed on a table and wrapped tightly with duct tape, you can scream all you want, but it won't change anything. Begging for your family, cursing god, your age, your sex, your pain, and terror—none of it can change anything. There, inevitability isn't merely a word, but an article of faith—the creed of those who have strapped hundreds to that table. In that moment, a human being comes to realize how very fragile he or she is, how impotent, how feeble. We are truly reeds, just as Blaise Pascal told us. The pain makes your joints want to break out of your skin, you're drenched in sweat, and they pour water on you. There's no need to scream and beg: they will go on anyway. They will torture you.

And yet, this book isn't about torture. Torture doesn't define this prison. There are at least a dozen other places in Donetsk where someone is being tortured. I need to get to the point. I need to explain, somehow, without emotion, what kind of place this prison is. Perhaps I could start from the end. I remember the first wave of

transfers from Isolation to other prisons, in the middle of the summer of 2018. At the time I was living in cell number five, and we had all heard of people being moved from numbers two and eight. Rumor had it that they had been taken to the Donetsk Central Jail. The giddiness in our cell approached Christmas joy: many packed up their few belongings in anticipation of a miracle.

And then the door opened, and the guard called out four names and commanded them to get ready to leave. It's hard to describe that moment. We congratulated the lucky ones, we shook their hands, we hugged them and gave them our tea and paper—the last and only things we had. We were genuinely happy, never mind that the guard had called someone else's name. If only I had known then that it would be another year before I was transferred to a regular jail! We were all simply happy, filled with the hope that, once begun, the transfers would continue and, eventually, it would be our turn to go. And then the door opened again, but one of the men hadn't quite packed the tea we'd given him. The guard yelled that they could go without him, and the man flung himself, stumbling, across the threshold and out of the cell, as he pulled his black sack over his own head. The door closed, but the cell vibrated with euphoria. Only the new prisoner, who had arrived just a week earlier, asked with confusion, "Where are they all rushing to like that?"

"To jail," we answered, just as confused.

Can you fathom that? Many considered the day of their transfer to jail as the date they were set free, and that can tell you more about Isolation than all of our

accounts of electrocution and terror. Sometimes we felt like we were in the middle of an experiment; the utter unreality of what was happening and being filmed with a dozen cameras would make us believe that. It seemed that Isolation's management was just looking for some unidentified edge, a breaking point: *Should we push harder? Should we say, Speak! Roll over! Will he bark? Yup, he barks. Now you can pull out your dick...*

And all of it is documented, all of it captured—there's a camera in each cell, in each solitary, in every basement. There are terabytes of recordings, hundreds of hours for international courts. This, too, feels like an experiment: Can these people really go on filming their crimes, with utter impunity, for six years, laughing off every UN report? It would appear that they can, in which case Isolation tells you what our world really is. All its meaninglessness, all its cruelty and injustice are concentrated right here, at 3 Paradise Street. There is no retribution, only the mockery of us, the defeated. Let others console themselves with the idea of a higher, cosmic justice. I don't believe in it. What do I believe in? I believe in the way these people laugh as they duct-tape someone to a table in their basement.

I'm often asked if I could forgive them. What I feel for them is certainly more—deeper—than hatred. You can forgive someone you hate; but Isolation is beyond all sense and beyond redemption. That's how I see it. Others might disagree.

**THE
TORTURE CAMP
ON PARADISE
STREET**

THE ARRIVAL

They unload us one at a time. Some of us have hands tied with duct tape; mine are tightly handcuffed. Each man has a sack or a plastic bag over his head. All I've brought from the basement where I was being held before are my notes. I'm wearing the rest. They line us up against a wall, with the bags on our heads, and search us thoroughly. They let me keep the notes.

This is our arrival, and each one of us eventually comes to realize that this isn't an ordinary prison—or, rather, an official prison where most prisoners are sent. Here, the charges are completely different: espionage, terrorism, and extremism. Here, I would be sentenced twice, to fifteen years apiece, on seven criminal charges. Six of these would be directly related to my work as a reporter, and the last one would be espionage. It's like that with almost everyone here. This is a place for the “particularly dangerous,” and the powers that be have determined that this label applies to us.

We're taken to our cells. All the doors are very thick and painted black; the windows are painted white. The lights are on at all times and can't be turned off, even during the day. As soon as a door opens, everyone in the cell jumps to their feet, pulls the bags over their heads, places their hands behind their backs, and turns to face the window, all within two or three seconds. This is the local protocol: no lying down or looking at the camera.

Isolation Prison, at 3 Paradise Street: all of us are here on the premises of what was formerly an insulation factory. Now it's a military base and, at the same time, one of the cruelest prisons of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). This place defies categorization: officially, it doesn't exist; unofficially, it houses dozens of prisoners in various basements and cells. We're surrounded by concrete and rebar. This is the manufacturing part of the plant, as I will see in a year's time, when I'm finally permitted to take the sack off my head before I shower. For now, we're trying to get used to the fact that our cell has both a toilet and a sink. We're still shedding patches of skin after being kept in the basement of the Office, a temporary holding facility where I spent six weeks. Others were less fortunate: they were there for two hundred days. The cell disorients us, as a description of it will certainly perplex everyone who hears it. *What do you mean, there was air conditioning in a concentration camp?* I hear this question all the time.

If you arrive in summer, you'll be greeted by small flowers under the windows, and, in some cells, you may indeed find AC units. That's the truth, but not all of it.

My cellmate, whose hair turned white over a single month, would tell you another part of it—that he couldn’t speak for a week, after losing his voice screaming all night from having electrical wires attached to his genitals. Electricity and his peeling scrotum should tell you more about Isolation than the fact that there’s AC.

Everything here is symbolic. If you take a walk around Isolation without a bag on your head—a privilege you may earn after a few months—while engaged in various activities, you’ll see busts and paintings of Vladimir Lenin, which were hung right at the stairs that lead to the basement. Once upon a time, after the insulation factory had gone out of business, this was a wonderful hub for artists of all sorts, who used these premises for gallery shows and installations. The subsequent takeover of Donetsk by the FSB and *russskii mir*—that amorphous and perverse concept of a “Russian world”—also became a victory for Lenin and his “shining path”: the route to the Communist paradise once again proved to lead through the hell of these basements. The old factory’s warren of interconnected bomb shelters became a torture labyrinth, and the large storage sheds were filled with tanks and hundreds of landmines.

Isolation, however, was intended to be more than just a prison for the untrustworthy. Yes, many of my fellow inmates landed here for “inappropriate correspondence” or posting on social media in support of the Ukrainian side in the war. That type of thing was instantly labeled extremism and came with a minimum sentence of five years. In fact, I received my own five years for the quotation marks I put around the phrase “Donetsk

People's Republic" in the stories I published in Ukrainian media, which later were published in book form as *In Isolation: Dispatches from Occupied Donbas*. I used the quotation marks to indicate that DPR's government wasn't recognized by either the international community or Russia itself. This choice of punctuation eventually resulted in my name on a piece of paper that proudly proclaimed me a captured criminal who had "denied the state sovereignty of the DPR." I asked my prosecutor about this: "You charged me with seven counts that added up to almost a life sentence. Obviously, the quotation marks matter very little to me in this context. But doesn't ruining someone's life over a single sentence they wrote on Facebook bother you? Just for this, you're putting a person in jail for five years?" The prosecutor replied to this, quite frankly, "Usually, with respect to individuals who write the DPR with quotation marks, we also find grounds to charge them with espionage."

This conveyor belt never stops. It keeps feeding the regime an endless supply of such one-sentence extremists and spies, victims who can be stripped of everything they have: cars, money, apartments, even small possessions—in my case, a set of kitchen knives and several bottles of cologne. (The latter were stolen in the course of an illegal search of my home: the DPR descendants of the Soviet CheKa, much like their ancestors in hobnailed boots and trench coats, aren't above pilfering.)

However, this is only one kind of Isolation inmate. The other kind comprises men and women who fought for the DPR and later found themselves ground up by the

wheels of the system. There wasn't a day in my twenty-eight months there when I didn't share a cell with a member of the local militia, rank notwithstanding: I've met as many majors as privates. As soon as Isolation replaced edgy paintings and art objects with razor wire and machine guns in 2014, it became a torture hub for the so-called *kazaki*, the Cossacks, as the new regime set about disarming its former "brothers-in-arms." This went on until 2016. I could read their call names and the dates of their imprisonment right there on the walls of my cell. The ones who made it up to the cells—"home," as they called it—were fortunate: most were warehoused in the basement, on wooden pallets, and many were simply killed. The exact number of bodies buried on Isolation's territory is unknown, but whenever you walk to the summer showers past one of the vent shafts, you get a solid whiff of decomposing corpses.

In 2017–18, the system refined itself. Whereas in the early days no one bothered with formal charges, now the regime accused its own soldiers of "treason" and "illegal possession of arms." I met someone from nearly every local battalion and brigade, including chiefs of staff and colonels. In 2017, they were taken to the basement in troves and returned broken and utterly at a loss as to why they had spilled their blood a mere year before. Those who were particularly tough were brought to Isolation along with their wives, to speed up the husband's compliance in signing the necessary documents.

That's the human face of this place. But it would take some time for me to see it. Upon my arrival, in the beginning, I could only sense that something was awry. I had





no idea of where we'd been brought and what dozens of us would have to survive here, but from the first moments the place felt peculiar, off. Eventually I realized that the strangeness emanated from the windows: we could hear traffic. There's a highway just beyond the factory's fence, and the noise was deafening. In the basement, where I was held prior to arriving here, the only thing we could hear was the elevator. When it stopped and then started again, we knew a night had passed. That's how we measured the time. When the lights went out—just once, in an emergency shutoff—and only the red light on the video camera glowed in the dark, we truly felt like we had been buried alive.

But things like that were different here. And these differences could send you spinning into one of the most dangerous illusions about this place. You think that, because you can hear traffic and see daylight, this place is temporary. You hear cars and buses go by, and you find yourself thinking that you can leave soon, because the other, “normal” world continues going about its business right there, outside your window. Back in the basement, we often wondered if regular life was still out there—if there were still things like cars, and people, and sunshine, and wind. This *thing* had happened to us, and so it felt like it must have happened to the rest of the world as well. It couldn't possibly be just us who had been plunged into darkness, right? We joked about it, of course, but I wondered how much time you had to spend in the muffled semi-darkness of that basement to actually believe it, to stop smiling about it.

Life, as it turned out, hadn't disappeared. For one, you meet all kinds of new people in this cell: it turns out that you don't *have* to be in solitary all the time, with a vague female saint in the mold-covered icon on the wall as the only human face you see when you take off your bag. Second, there *must* be people driving all those cars and someone at the wheel of the bus that's taking passengers somewhere on their daily business. They go on living their lives, but do they know that we're *in here*? Of course, they aren't aware of any of us personally, but they're well aware of this prison. In a few months, one of the guards will brag that even bus drivers avoided stopping anywhere near it. The terrible reputation of the "Donetsk Dachau" makes its founders truly proud. They've learned to manufacture fear—the only product coming out of this old factory.

These ideas scatter like shards of a broken mirror at the sound of a rifle butt hitting the door. I literally leap off my cot, along with a dozen other men, and hear my name being called: "You! Put on the sack! Face the wall! Keep your head down! Hands behind your back! Step to the right. Out you go." This was the post-arrival medical examination. At the time I didn't yet know that the person examining us would be one of the cruelest local sadists. By the force of morbid irony, he was the local doctor. He let me take the bag off my head since he was wearing a black balaclava over his face and asked me if I had any complaints from the previous site. I told him that I couldn't feel the knuckles in my thumbs, where they had attached the wires. "That's nothing," he said. "Any substantial complaints?" I had nothing substantial to offer.

Fast-forwarding a bit, I'll share that we would always hear this man as soon as he arrived. He had a custom of screaming profanities at the new inmates as soon as he saw them, and, at night, together with the man who ran this place, he would walk around the cell blocks and pull people out at random. What happened to these people depended on how much their torturers had drunk and how much imagination they had. In the morning, that very same man would examine ribs he had caused to snap and burns his torture had left. It's no surprise that he had waved off my numb fingers.

But I knew none of this on that first day. On top of that, not having the bag on my head after six weeks of wearing it during every conversation made me uncomfortable. Shockingly, I felt almost guilty for standing in front of the doctor without the bag over my head, even though he himself had told me to take it off. It made me realize how much I had already changed, despite the fact that my time in Isolation was just beginning. I felt relieved when I was finally told to put my bag back on and was sent back to my cell. Through the window, cracked open, I could glimpse a bright different world.

ISOLATION AND THE PRISON CODE

When I was brought from solitary confinement in the basement to my new cell in Isolation and the bag was removed from my head, the first thing I heard was, “This is the cot where the pederast sleeps. Don’t talk to him, don’t take anything from him, and don’t ever put anything of yours on his cot. Got it?” I was shocked. For a moment, I had thought I had landed in a regular prison (and that would have been good news). But this wasn’t the case. Not only was Isolation far beyond any accepted concept of a prison, but even the Code that ruled life in prison—a system of conventions, or *poniatiia* in Russian, as it’s referred to by prisoners—was different in every cell, each warped to its own perverted taste.

Before I can describe Isolation’s so-called Prison Code for you, however, let me take a moment to provide a sketch of the regular criminal system of rules and norms that govern life in any place of incarceration in the post-Soviet space. Let me also note right here, at the

outset, that, prior to being captured and imprisoned, I did no reporting on the prison system and thus can't claim any professional expertise in this vast field. The Code itself has undergone so many changes and adaptations throughout its long existence—while never being set down in writing—that often, when things come “to a wall,” meaning, a criminal dispute that needs to be resolved, the parties involved begin by clarifying whether they will be using the old or the new interpretation of the Code.

The last “authentic” Code enforcer, the widely acknowledged lawmaker of the crime world, was Vasia the Diamond, otherwise known as Vladimir Babushkin, whose death in the grim White Swan Colony signaled the beginning of the end of the old criminal rule system. The old Code insisted that, in order to be considered a “crime lord,” a man had to have served time, couldn't marry or have a family, could own no property, and was prohibited from living lavishly or holding a paying job. I heard an account



of two “lawmakers” meeting in Odesa once, from a criminal who had had the chance to observe the old-timers in action. One of the criminals involved lived in near homelessness in Odesa: he barely had any furniture, his door didn’t lock, and he died right there in his bare apartment on his lumpy old couch. The other criminal came to the parlay from Moscow, in an expensive car and with an army of bodyguards, which prompted the Odesa character to snicker, “Did you come to fight a war or talk to your brother?”

I have yet another reason to tread carefully around the topic of the Code. One of my cellmates, a dyed-in-the-wool criminal, said the following to me: “You’ve been exposed to a very small slice of the inside life in prison. Judging life in prison based on your experience in Isolation is like thinking you know a woman when all you’ve seen is a condom.” He was right, of course. In Isolation, I glimpsed the frayed edge of the “normalcy” that one encounters in labor camps. Even in the penal colony, where I was kept right before the prisoner swap that freed me, life was completely different. Despite the fact that our block was set aside to house exclusively us, political prisoners—or, as they called us, “politicals,” or “Germans”—with sheets of iron welded over the windows and razor wire all around, we still had opportunities to interact with the ordinary criminals on the way to the bathhouse or administrative building. There were plenty of criminals in the disciplinary unit as well: the authorities regularly sent criminal bosses there for violations of the official rules, and we passed through there as a matter of course, for the first two weeks after transfer.

This is what I *can* tell you: it took only the briefest of encounters with an ordinary criminal to realize how utterly broken an Isolation inmate such as myself was inside. The criminals, to a man, were calm and confident. Sometimes they even displayed insolence toward the guards, showed an intact sense of humor, and could generally be described as being in a good mood—and all this despite the fact that they couldn't expect to be traded in a prisoner exchange. I was amazed to speak to an inmate that was assisting the administration in processing our intake. The man had served almost the full fifteen years of his sentence, but he was in good spirits, joked constantly, and was genuinely shocked to see our sentences, which were all upward of ten years.

An actual criminal can expect a relatively predictable life on the inside: decades-old customs of prison culture shape it without fail, and even the most desperate prisoners don't dare violate them. In the disciplinary cell of the colony, these men reminded me every day that mentally I was still in Isolation. We lived in a dirty cold cell, but you weren't expected to jump to your feet every time the door opened. You didn't have to look at the floor and put your hands behind your back. You might even hear yourself addressed as *vy*, the polite and formal pronoun "you" in Ukrainian and Russian. After twenty-eight months of solely being called "shit" and "fag" while staring at someone else's boots, it was difficult to recall that you were still human.

I hope to be forgiven for drawing the following comparison: the criminal world, even in its extreme form—for instance, in a maximum-security prison—is a system

governed by symbols, much like a church. Think about it. Entering a church, a devout Christian crosses himself, and the way he does so signals whether he's Orthodox or Catholic. When you pray for health, you put your candle in a round holder; when you pray for the salvation of a soul, you do so in front of a crucifix; and so on. You can tell how often a person goes to church, how much they've internalized the rites, and how confident they are in their ability to participate.

The same applies to the world of the Prison Code. Experienced criminals can judge a first-timer by the way he enters the cell, the vocabulary he uses, his inflection, and the way he walks. Everything inside a cell is regimented. The so-called warder's cot is usually the one farthest from the toilet; the closer you sleep to the "shitter," the lower your status. A few questions in the criminal slang can clarify how familiar you are with prison life—that is, whether you understand anything at all, because the slang varies with the region.

None of this pertained to Isolation. Let me give you an example. An actual criminal was scheduled to be transferred to our cell, number four, but, for the night before his transfer, he was placed next door, in number eight. We could all hear him being escorted there. He stepped into the cell and, out of force of habit and custom, called out, "Hello, my new home!" and immediately received several heavy blows from the inmates surrounding him. They all acted on the direct order of the administration that felt that the new man was too insolent and couldn't quite grasp the need to pull a bag over his own head as required.

We learned all of this the following day, when the man was moved from number eight to our number four. He came in with a modest “Good morning,” apparently alert to the possibility of being greeted in the same manner as the day before. Every cell lived its own life. What kind of life that was depended on the number and backgrounds of the people in it.

On the first day in Isolation, every newcomer was told one of his cell’s cardinal rules: “Don’t eat, don’t drink.” For someone who has no experience on the inside, this has little if any meaning. As it turns out, this is something that you’re supposed to say every time you go to relieve yourself, so that all your cellmates can stop eating or drinking if they happen to be doing so at the time, in order to not to get “tainted” by the taboo of the toilet: that is, not to break the rule and thus slip down the cell’s hierarchy. A violator could expect to be forced to eat an entire bar of soap—a punishment that applied to both whoever didn’t stop consuming food or neglected to utter the warning. This takes some getting used to. Imagine ten or so men drinking tea or water and instantly putting their mugs down if someone says the magic words. Some days you’d hear the warning dozens of times. It took a week before it stopped seeming absurd.

In our cell, this custom ended with the arrival of the above-mentioned criminal, who explained that the rule by and large applied only to general and high-security prison camps, and not universally, because, if there are a hundred men in a single barrack, it’s physically impossible to warn them all when you’re about to go. What’s more, in maximum security camps, where this guy had spent

twenty years, you could keep on chewing your sandwich while staring straight at a defecating cellmate and not complicate your life unnecessarily. I can share that, after six months of “Don’t eat, don’t drink,” and almost compulsively checking whether the toilet was vacant, it took our cell population a while to shrug off the tension that had been drilled into us like dogs in our first twenty-four hours there. There was a ripple effect, too: when I was transferred to cell number five, I was able to slowly convince the dozen other men being held there to abandon the rule as well, by arguing that actual criminals found it laughable.

Another sacred rule of the inside is keeping things clean. That might just be one of the most practical and truly necessary rules there, and all the inmates followed it with great diligence. Men who appeared to flout this rule risked falling into a number of undesirable categories that could result in being designated a “demon”—a bottom-caste individual that doesn’t maintain his appearance and is compelled to do the dirtiest work in the cell (and to live on the floor *under* the cots, in some cases). Isolation’s management elevated this rule to a point of absurdity. During my first twenty-four hours there, we scrubbed our cell floor eight times—until the water in the mop bucket was as clear as when it had come out of the tap. The rubber mat at the door had to absolutely be maintained in position, with its stripes perpendicular to the entrance. No one was permitted to lie down on their cot during the day, pillows had to be lined up and the cot neatly made, and you were only allowed to sit on the edge of it. All of

this was monitored through cameras, and newcomers were made to understand that any rule or instruction, no matter how absurd, had to be carried out promptly and without fail.

At the bottom of the prison caste ladder were the “lowered,” as they were called in the actual prison world, and there were only a few men like that in Isolation. They had to eat apart from everyone else without approaching the communal tables and using their own dishes (often chipped). However, it was Isolation’s administration that chose to put them in the “lowered” category; their status wasn’t due to the Prison Code of the cell collective. In Isolation, a man could end up at the bottom just because he couldn’t bring himself to sign a confession.

Picture this: you’re in a so-called deluxe cell—a room measuring about five by seven feet, with two cots and a refuse bucket. There’s no ventilation. Suddenly the door flies open, and before you even have a chance to turn away and pull a trash bag over your head (newcomers were often issued black plastic trash bags for this purpose), as you know you’re expected to, you receive a powerful blow in your back, which is accompanied by a heap of profanity and the order, “Get under the cot, you shit!” Anyone who hasn’t experienced the local system won’t appreciate that having to crawl under the cot yourself is much worse than being beaten in that place. The latter is certainly a threat to your health, but the former is liable to ruin the remainder of your existence in prison much more. A man who had complied with the order would afterward be taken for further humiliation to the Media



Room—a cell inhabited by inmates favored by the administration—and deposited with the aside, “This one’s from under the cot.” And thus, he would find himself plunged to the bottom of the cell hierarchy, where he would be compelled to do all the dirty work and often even live apart from everyone else.

I once asked an old criminal if this was consistent with his other experiences in prison and whether he would suffer ostracism elsewhere because of who his cellmates were in Isolation. “The Code doesn’t apply here,” he told me. “Let them first define this place for me. Just

putting bars on the windows doesn't make it a prison. Why am I in a cell with military men? Why am I guarded by soldiers? Why are there tanks outside my window and women outside my wall? Where's my proper food ration? We don't even get bread. We don't get visitors or lawyers. There are fifteen of us in a room that's supposed to hold three. Why do I need the bag when the door opens? Why should I turn away? Why am I singing the fucking anthem in the morning? You call this a jail? It's a loony bin. There's no code in a loony bin. I've been inside with people who had done thirty years by the late nineties. We called them grandmas: old men, with no teeth—real criminals. Trust me, they'd seen a lot, but they never described anything like this place. All this charade about making someone "lowered"—it's all fake. These guys don't understand that it's our culture; people have died on the inside because they were "lowered," and people live in this hierarchy. You can't just put on a balaclava, grab a machine gun, and "lower" someone. And what if it wasn't a dick you got up your ass? For example, they tortured this one guy yesterday. They shoved an electric prod up his anus and then brought him to our cell. Is that the same or different? If you stick to technicalities, half the cell here should sleep separately and eat from chipped dishes. But they don't get it."

As you can imagine, ex-cons had a hard time in Iso-lation. The rules of the world familiar to them didn't apply; the identity they thought they knew disintegrated. They were lost, unsure of how to behave in this place, which very much resembled a prison in form but was

a cross between a madhouse and a POW camp in content. Still, these men behaved differently from the ordinary civilians or the military.

They could be counted on to see to a new man's needs before asking any questions. Before they had learned anything—who the newcomer was, what he had been charged with, how he had ended up there—a good old-fashioned ex-con would always offer a cup of tea, a bar of soap (if he had one), a piece of old clothing, and only then would he probe. The difference in their attitude was particularly glaring when contrasted with that of former military personnel, whenever one of them was in charge of a cell. They would start with a kind of interrogation, so that they can show off their “expertise” in the local Prison Code, aiming to categorize the newcomer in the existing cell hierarchy as quickly as possible. The more one learned about the actual criminal world and its laws, the more absurd Isolation customs became: no self-respecting criminal could fathom having the cell boss *appointed* by the prison administration and chosen from among former combatants to boot.

The administration, of course, took every opportunity to spark conflict between its chosen “warders” and the ordinary inmates. We asked for a mirror once, to which the administration responded by advising us to gaze into the refuse bucket as much as we pleased—and yes, if you could ignore the smell, you could almost see your reflection in the gallons of urine. Naturally, taking the bucket out was the inmates' duty, which provided yet another source of entertainment for Isolation's staff. A very steep

set of stairs had to be climbed, and, of course, the administration wouldn't let you take the bucket out until it was overflowing, which meant inevitably splashing shit on whomever was coming up behind. This task was routinely performed by newcomers, who had to carry the bucket with plastic bags over their heads, barely able to peek out from under them. As a result, the man on toilet duty would return to his cell covered in excrement and would be unable to wash since there was barely enough water to drink. The appointed warder would abuse him mercilessly for being "tainted," while the administration watched the scene live on closed-circuit TV with great satisfaction.

Why did we need a mirror in the first place? That was another mind game. Every man was expected to shave his head and, because of the whole thing with the "lowered" caste—one of which lived entirely apart from others in the basement—everyone preferred to do the job himself. Of course, a single patch of hair you miss could earn you a beating, so we convinced our warder to request a mirror. You know how that went.

A true prison environment has its advantages, which are few but undeniable. Among them is the sanctity of "yes" and "no," with nothing in between. If a convict says "yes," and then changes his answer to a "no" or a "half-yes," he'll have a rough time for the rest of his sentence. This particular article of faith can actually be traced to the Bible: "But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil" (Matthew 5:37). While this hasn't quite taken root in our

society at large, it's rigorously observed on the inside. In the cases of "shafting," that is, when there is conflict and a man's life hangs in the balance, the cons of the late-Soviet, classic Code settled the matter with short yes-or-no questions: Were you there? Did you see it yourself? Did you hear him say that? Can you confirm this? And everyone involved would understand that each answer would affect his reputation for years to come.

Where does this come from? The Code originates from the "sealed" facilities, also known as "sealers"—maximum security places for repeat offenders that were particularly dangerous. Life in this type of prison might involve spending a decade or more in a cell with the same person. An inmate of such a prison, then, might have to wait years for his enemy to make a slip that would warrant a formal dispute, so you could be certain that if you said "yes" to something twenty years before and then changed it to a "no" ten years later, you would be reminded of it. These criminals forget and forgive nothing: they bide their time and wait for the opportune moment. That's why it's a good idea to choose your words carefully.

I had my nose broken in Isolation once. It wasn't the administration that did it, but a cellmate of mine, a hardened criminal with twenty-three years in a "sealed" facility under his belt. In the 1990s and 2000s, he had been mingling with the so-called thieves in law, that is, organized crime bosses. The atmosphere in our cell was tense; only a day before it happened, I had said it felt like we were about to start knifing each other because we didn't talk. None of us could fathom what lay ahead. We were

so different that I wondered if putting us in one cell was an experiment in itself, a surreal apparition on the CCTV screen: a reporter, a special services veteran, a committed con, a long-haul truck driver, a member of the Ukrainian military, a couple of the so-called militiamen, and an ordinary miner now accused of being a spy. A lack of food, an ounce or two of bread per man per day, the administration's refusal to transfer us even though we had already been sentenced, the uncertainty surrounding prisoner swaps—the totality of this place itself had exhausted everyone to the point where any spark, anything, would result in violence. I said something, he said something. I was misunderstood, so I said he had misinterpreted my words, to which he replied, "I'm telling you in front of all these people that if you don't shut up, I'll crack your skull." A few seconds later my face was awash in tears and blood from my broken nose because he had misinterpreted my words and I had felt compelled to set the record straight. And since, over his long life on the inside, he had internalized the lesson of surviving at all costs, he also tried to poke out one of my eyes. I wouldn't be writing this if not for a couple of other guys that intervened. One of them literally flung himself onto my opponent (who was six and a half feet tall), grabbed him by the neck, and dragged him away.

Another half an hour later, with me supine on my cot with paper napkins stuffed up my nose and one eye swollen completely shut, this same con perched himself at the edge of the cot and placed his enormous metal mug (old-timers have a number of reasons for only using tin mugs) filled with cold water on my eye and said,

“Stas, I have never in my life apologized to anyone.” He still didn’t apologize, but we understood one another as cons do—without superfluous words. We understood each other because we both knew that my broken nose and swollen eye were the consequence of the walls that held us, not of whatever I or he had said.

I came to have a special appreciation for men that had served significant time before landing in Isolation. Aside from the fact that these men always patiently explained the straightforward physical habits of living in a small, cramped space—things to do with breathing and one’s heart rate—they also had a unique view of values in a life restricted to twenty square feet of space. Of course, I’m not talking about practical things, like clean sheets or a chance to spend more than five minutes in the shower—any inmate, once he’s released, can appreciate those. The opportunity to sleep on a mattress rather than on lumpy boards is a blessing that I now contemplate every time I make my bed. But you need more when you’re sentenced to sleeping on lumpy boards for years, and there are ideas beyond the Code that form a system of meaning for those on the inside.

I once asked such a man for a bunch of nitroglycerin pills after my request to be transferred to a normal prison had again been denied. God only knows how this individual had managed to keep intact a whole bottle of nitroglycerin pills that he’d been given a year before, even after he was tortured, but I knew he had it. My plan was to feign a heart attack to get out of there and make it at least as far as the prison infirmary. I couldn’t carry out

this plan in Isolation—tricks like that produced very little beyond smirks—but I was scheduled for a trip to the Office a few days later and could do it then. Admittedly, it wouldn't have bothered me very much if I died either.

The man heard me out and then told me about the time he got his longest sentence, eleven years in maximum security: he had been convicted of armed robbery. When he arrived in his new “sealed” facility, he spent a long time studying his cell—until he felt that he was going to spend eleven years in that room. He had to *feel* it, not just know it in his mind. At that point he decided to kill himself, but before he did, he wanted to speak to a particular criminal he had known quite well on the outside. So, he just called him right from the cell. I don't know what exactly this criminal told him that convinced the man to serve his sentence, but here's what he said to me: “The upshot was that the most important thing is to not become embittered. Losing heart and losing empathy is what dooms the guys who just keep cycling through the system. Of my sentence, I ended up spending nine years in the ‘sealer’—but I didn't become cruel. I've been here for only a year, and already I hate absolutely every human being on this planet, myself included. Maybe you want to simulate a heart attack or maybe you actually want to kill yourself. I won't give you the pills because I don't know how many pills you need for what you intend to do. But if it's the latter, think about this: to die embittered is to die in vain. The worst thing you can do to those running this place is to survive and tell people what goes on here.”

Mind you, you won't find more committed cynics than these guys anywhere. Decades under maximum security have taught them to judge harshly not only another person's life but also their own. You may think that these men believe in nothing: they go to jail for violent crimes (murder, armed robbery, or kidnapping) and then spend decades watching others try to survive. Surviving on the inside inevitably involves lying, being humiliated, fearing for your life, and stabbing others in the back (metaphorically, if not literally). And yet, it's these apparently irredeemable cons that will come sit on your cot if they see you are having a hard time and strike up a conversation. Without much ado, they'll share the last of what they have with a man they may kill the following year. And it was in these people that I saw the greatest hatred toward Isolation, the hatred I myself felt. They didn't hate it for the torture that was inflicted upon them, or for their sentences upward of twelve years for "espionage"—something they thought existed only in movies. They hated the absurdity of it, the pretense. Many of these men had already experienced the degradation in which Isolation specialized. They'd been beaten, starved, and confined before (the electric shock part might have been new). But, as one of them put it, "In a 'sealer,' I always knew what I'd done to bring it on." The deprivation was part of their lives, part of their refusal to obey the system they despised and that despised them in return. There was meaning in that.

Isolation erased that meaning. It didn't matter who or what you were before coming here—whether you were a criminal, a miner, a reporter, or a soldier, a man or

a woman, young or old. But the ex-cons experienced the mindlessness of the daily suffering especially acutely, more so than the people that had never been imprisoned. I was a first-timer myself, yet we shared this feeling.

Another dearly held value of prison culture is the idea that the jail must be broken down, not built up. That means that it's prohibited to participate in any work that contributes to the expansion or improvement of the facility. I met a guy who had spent six months in solitary for refusing to make wire, some of which was to be used on his prison's fence. "I won't fence myself in," he told the guards and ended up tracing figure eights on his walks outside afterwards. During his long time in solitary, he folded up his cot each morning and spent the day walking in the shape of eight around the two supports on which the cot rested at night. This habit stayed with him for a long time after leaving solitary.

The taboo on building up the jail didn't apply in Isolation. Everything—from the bars to the cots—was made by the inmates themselves, and how you felt about it mattered not in the least. Of course, most of the inmates weren't even aware that the Code prohibited such work. We just heard the siren in the morning and the order "Move it." We'd get beaten in the corridors, then spend the hot summer day welding stuff, which left just about enough energy to wonder if we were going to survive until nighttime. The only people who really cared whether we were jailed or captured were the ex-cons, one of whom happened to be a committed Nazi.

It's worth noting that, generally speaking, in the post-Soviet space, Nazi-themed tattoos such as swastikas or crosses signal the wearer's rejection of the prison system. Such an individual never works, preferring the punishment of solitary confinement to compliance, lives according to the Code, and aspires to the top of the criminal hierarchy. And that's exactly the kind of man I met in Isolation, except that, in addition to all these traits, he was also a true devotee of the Third Reich. I was astonished at his command of Ernst Röhm's and Rudolf Hess's biographies, which he had memorized in great detail. At the same time, to the local authorities, who proclaimed themselves to be righteous opponents of the "fascist" Ukrainian government, he insisted that the tattoos were a pure prison affectation.

I mention this man because he found the AC unit in our cell highly objectionable. "You have to destroy the prison, not build it! And you drag all this stuff in here," he would complain. Since he, like all ex-cons, also possessed a healthy sense of humor and we got along quite well, I didn't miss the chance to ask, "Are you saying that as a Nazi or a con?"

Eventually, the con in him won: as soon as he realized that working outdoors put him near the kitchen, he volunteered to help with the construction of the checkpoint. Later, after he'd been transferred to another cell full of the administration's favorites, we ran into each other during morning exercise. "Isn't it taboo to build up the jail?" I asked, recalling his AC objections, to which he responded, "I'm building fortifications. That's different."

Isolation constantly stretched and bent any proper notions of the Code. Every man in the cell could have the “Don’t eat, don’t drink” rule drilled into him and, at the same time, actively keep someone awake. The proper Prison Code commands that a sleeping man be allowed to lie even if he’s snoring unbearably. You often hear that sleep is sacred because a sleeping inmate is free of suffering: he isn’t doing the time, but the sentence clock is still ticking. The old laws also prohibited the wounding or killing of a sleeping man. This was still observed in Isolation, but the rest of the Code wasn’t. In cells that housed the administration’s favorites, if a man snored, he could be put up against the wall for the entire night or have a “lowered” inmate assigned to keep him awake. This sort of thing was the reason why ex-cons treated the local administration and the ex-military imprisoned in Isolation as “machine gunners”—essentially, cretins who were beyond the Code, had no capacity for independent thought, and were only good for doing what they were told. Whenever something went awry, the ex-con in our cell would wave it off, saying, “What do you want from them? They’re just machine gunners.”

By the same reasoning, some ex-cons looked down on us civilians. I remember us talking about the administration having no concept of human value. An old-timer in our cell listened for a long time without saying anything, and then delivered the following speech (I’m paraphrasing, but the content stands):

Listen to you go on about human beings!
What do you have left in you that's human?
Human beings don't behave the way you do.
Why should you tremble when the door opens?
Why do you walk around the cell with your
hands behind your back when no one's watch-
ing? Why does this guy here avoid going to
the toilet so as not to walk past the window?
Because someone in a different cell told him,
"If you go by the window one more time, we'll
'lower' you?" The window is painted over, don't
you see? It's painted! No one can see through
it. They just want to keep you in fear. A plas-
tic bottle crackles, and the whole cell jumps up
and reaches for their hoods because they think
it's the door. Human beings... Even in the Army,
they don't care anymore if your bed is picture
perfect. Yet here, if even a tiny bit of the blan-
ket is out of line, off to the hole you go. The cot
has to be made with perfect corners? Fine, but
then tomorrow they'll tell us that we can't sit on
our cots because we'll mess them up. I've seen
that happen before. I'm not saying you should
cause trouble, that'll just make it worse. But
you can rock the system a little—give it a shove.
Say, they told you to fix your blanket and you
didn't—maybe tomorrow they'll overlook it.
And if they throw you into the hole—sure, it's
no picnic, but then you know you've got to try
something different. Otherwise, we'll all soon

be so scared that we'll crawl under the cots ourselves just so we can breathe. I know that some of you have been here for two years and have never seen anything different. You haven't been to a real prison, you don't know how people live—people, mind you, not the vegetables you've turned into. I've done twenty years, and I know a thing or two, so believe me when I tell you: this is a loony bin.

The same ex-con, however, told me something else, too, and I bring it up to underscore what Isolation meant to men you would think had seen everything. "You know, one thing we say on the inside," he told me, "is 'respect the time.' Maybe a man was sentenced unjustly, maybe not. Either way, he's doing time. He might change, he can choose to improve himself or not. Once you've done seven, ten, twelve years—that fact alone earns you the right to be heard. You've seen it here. I may not like you very much. Plus, you're a reporter and I'm a con—we live in different worlds. But here you can count one day for five. If you've been here a year, that's five by my math. Take it from me: I've spent half my life in 'sealers,' where you step into a cell and can't even see the cots through the cigarette smoke. And that was still better than this. I'll always hear you out—because you've done time here and haven't lost your mind."

FEAR

Fear has a special place in the system inmates inhabit. Or not even “inhabit”—rather, they *exist* in a system designed to crush one’s individuality, through abuse and oppression, until the pressure cooker of “Face the wall!” and “Head down!” boils a person down to a single primitive set of behaviors. The administration’s will is the only source of power in this system. If it could instill this feeling—this round-the-clock paralysis—in a man, he’d turn into pliable clay that could be shaped into anything. The only exception to this rule is when the fear of torture or another beating is so overwhelming that a person can no longer comply with whatever order would stave off the abuse. At such times, a man’s will would be paralyzed completely, and no external stimulus—neither threats nor blows—could break him out of this condition. Thus, Isolation administration’s main job was to train the inmates to fear: constantly, without respite, day and night (because the fear could

manifest as nightmares or crippling anxiety about being roused), and abuse and torture were just the tools in its toolbox.

Contrary to common belief, you can experience many kinds of fear. In Isolation, I came to know so many different shades of fear—from mortal dread, when I caught myself not even breathing, to general anxiety—that I wouldn't venture to define the predominant one I felt. What I can say is that the deepest terror came not during the torture but afterward, as a mental after-shock in relative safety. When we were transferred from the basement of the Office to a brightly lit cell in Isolation, with a sink and an actual toilet, I tried not to move at all, despite the fact that I used to run across the eighteen feet from the door to the cot in my old basement cell. In Isolation, we were ordered not to look at the windows (never mind that they were painted over), or at the CCTV camera, or at the tray slot—the small opening in the door through which the guards delivered food. Because each of these objects was located on a different wall, we were compelled to stare straight ahead in space or at the floor, silently and without moving. Sitting still was not expressly required in Isolation, but I was so possessed by fear that I even avoided going to the toilet. Why? Quite simply because I knew where they'd brought us.

I had heard plenty about Isolation back in the Office's basement from people that had already been there. I was particularly affected by the account of an inmate who not only had had his scrotum torn apart through electrical torture, but had then been placed in a coffin



and nailed shut in it. Guards then took the coffin outside and threw gravel on top of it: they said they wanted to replicate the “Mykola Hohol effect,” since, according to the popular legend, Mykola Hohol (Nikolai Gogol) was buried alive. I can share this now with you because both the victim and the man who corroborated it survived and are free. But, when I heard the story in my basement cell, after being tortured myself, I was so stunned by what was possible in the “Donetsk Dachau” that the horror at the thought of being put there overwhelmed me. When they finally led us out of the basement, the hood on my head didn’t matter: I knew the city well and could tell by the van’s turns that we weren’t being taken to the pre-trial detention facility.

It didn't help to hear one of the "Spartans"—a former combatant from the DPR Sparta Battalion—say after he returned to the basement from Isolation, "If you want to keep your health, you can't go to Isolation." Naïvely I asked if he was referring to electric shock torture, to which he responded, "That's yesterday's news. They may now strip you naked and tell you to hold up the wall while they beat you from behind with a special pipe on your nuts and dick until they swell like a bull's." To "hold up a wall" meant to stand with your face to the wall, your palms placed above your head, and to remain in that position until you collapsed—a practice of mild punishment in Isolation. And whereas in the basement, where once I had gotten over the initial shock of my capture, I could afford to think (and even to write down my ideas, which clearly indicated I was mentally stable), in Isolation, a dull but permanent sense of dread was my only reality for months. Eating and dreading—those were the only two things we could manage.

I feel it is wrong to believe that inmates feared particular instances of pain or sexual violence. Rather, over months of observation, I realized that we were living in a mental coma regardless of how recent or anticipated a "disciplinary event" was. Let me demonstrate with the example of a man who was subjected to a farcical "lung check" every day: every time the guards delivered food, he had to press his chest against the opening in the door. After a certain, random interval, someone would punch him very hard from outside. Eventually the guards started entertaining themselves by simply making him stand

there—eyes pressed shut and trembling—and omitting the blow. That, broadly, applied to us all: regardless of whether we were being beaten at a particular moment in time, we trembled *all* of the time in anticipation of it.



Predictably for such extreme conditions, the pathological fear inmates experienced at some point morphed into a similarly pathological indifference. That doesn't mean that we all became heroes. A hero is the result of action despite fear. We were the sum of indifference and collapse. When a stimulus is constantly applied, it stops registering. Those who set out to torture people for a long time ought to take this into account: after a certain amount of time, you can knock your rifle butt on the cell door all you want (which they loved to do at night), and all you'll get is a glassy stare from the same people that used to once leap into the air at a mere crackle.

PURE EVIL

Writing here about my time in Isolation, I purposefully avoid using surnames or even first names. It would be cruel to name a survivor. For anyone who's been through that place, the rape and torture, recognizing themselves in this book would only add to the trauma. As for the perpetrators, they can keep their names until they face justice. I know that none of them have repented; every word I write is a joke to them.

But I do want to make one exception: the lord and master of Isolation, who was known to everyone by the nickname Palych. He cannot be overlooked. Without him, Isolation as we knew it wouldn't have existed, and once he disappeared—when, in February 2018, he found himself locked up in another basement—we all breathed a sigh of relief. It was the end of an era we had thought would never end.

What can I tell you about this man? My immediate instinct is for hyperbole: he was Criminal Number

One, Pure Evil. But that's too abstract for someone who ground hundreds of lives into ashes. He was a committed sadist, rapist, executioner, and alcoholic; a psychopath, who read people perfectly, manipulated them masterfully, and possessed a wicked sense of humor. He masterminded the system of abuse in Isolation precisely in a way that made inmates hate each other, eliminating the very possibility of a revolt. He was fully capable of beating a man to within an inch of his life, and then doing the same thing to whoever dared disturb a hair on his victim's head without his say-so. To use a trite metaphor, he pursued his own ends and converted his enemies by beating them with a stick, while at the same time letting them chew on the carrot. He was the man who could rampage through our cell in the middle of the night, tossing us all over the floor like rag dolls, then show up the next morning with a bag of chocolates past their expiration date and distribute them to us while cursing us for "making" him do it all.

He did believe that we were culpable, but not because of whatever we'd been charged with or our political views. He couldn't care less about politics. "Best to keep neutral," he'd say whenever the conversation touched on anything political. He hated us for his own personal reason: it was our fault that he had ended up a prisoner of Isolation himself. With our blood on his hands, he couldn't leave the facility for fear of being killed by someone he had once tortured. He lived on the second floor, right above us. "It's not that you are doing your time in my place," he used to say, "it's me doing mine in yours."

I heard Palych's name for the first time in Isolation's basement, where I had been thrown three days after my transfer from the Office's basement. I had spent just two days upstairs, in a well-lit and warm cell, before being sent downstairs again along with nine other prisoners. Since I already had six weeks of basement experience in much worse conditions, the basement itself didn't bother me that much. It was equipped with a "barrel"—a fairly large refuse bucket—and a fan that sucked moisture out, so my only challenges were water and other people. After a month and a half in solitary, I had lost the skill of being around other people, especially former separatist "rebel" combatants, who were sometimes thrown into the mix.

One night a cellmate shared the secret with me. "Do you know who's in charge here?" he whispered into my ear. At that moment it was the place itself that scared me, so I hadn't given its management much thought and told my cellmate as much. He smirked and replied that this only showed that I still had no clue.

"This place and its boss are one and the same thing," he mouthed, covering his face with his hand so that the camera wouldn't capture us talking. "His name is Palych. You'll meet him. He meets everyone. Alright, let's rest."

And so it was. After several days in Isolation's basement, right before lights out, the door opened and my heart sank: I heard my name being called. A summons upstairs at that time of night could mean only one thing: you were going to be tortured. When you're standing in a basement cell with a hood on your head and have no idea what's going on behind you, hearing your name is about the worst thing that can happen.

СХОДИ
до
ПОДВАЛЫ
↓

Stairs to the basement

↑
СХОДИ
на 2-й
ПОВЕРХ

Stairs to the
2nd floor

„МОНИТОРЕА“

“Monitoring Room”

„ЛЮКС“

“Deluxe”
cell

КАРЗЕ

“Cooler”
(solitary
cell)

КОРИ

Hallway

“РЕСЕПШН”

“Reception”

КОРИДОР

Hallway

Exit

ВУЛИЦА
↓

КАМЕРА
N1

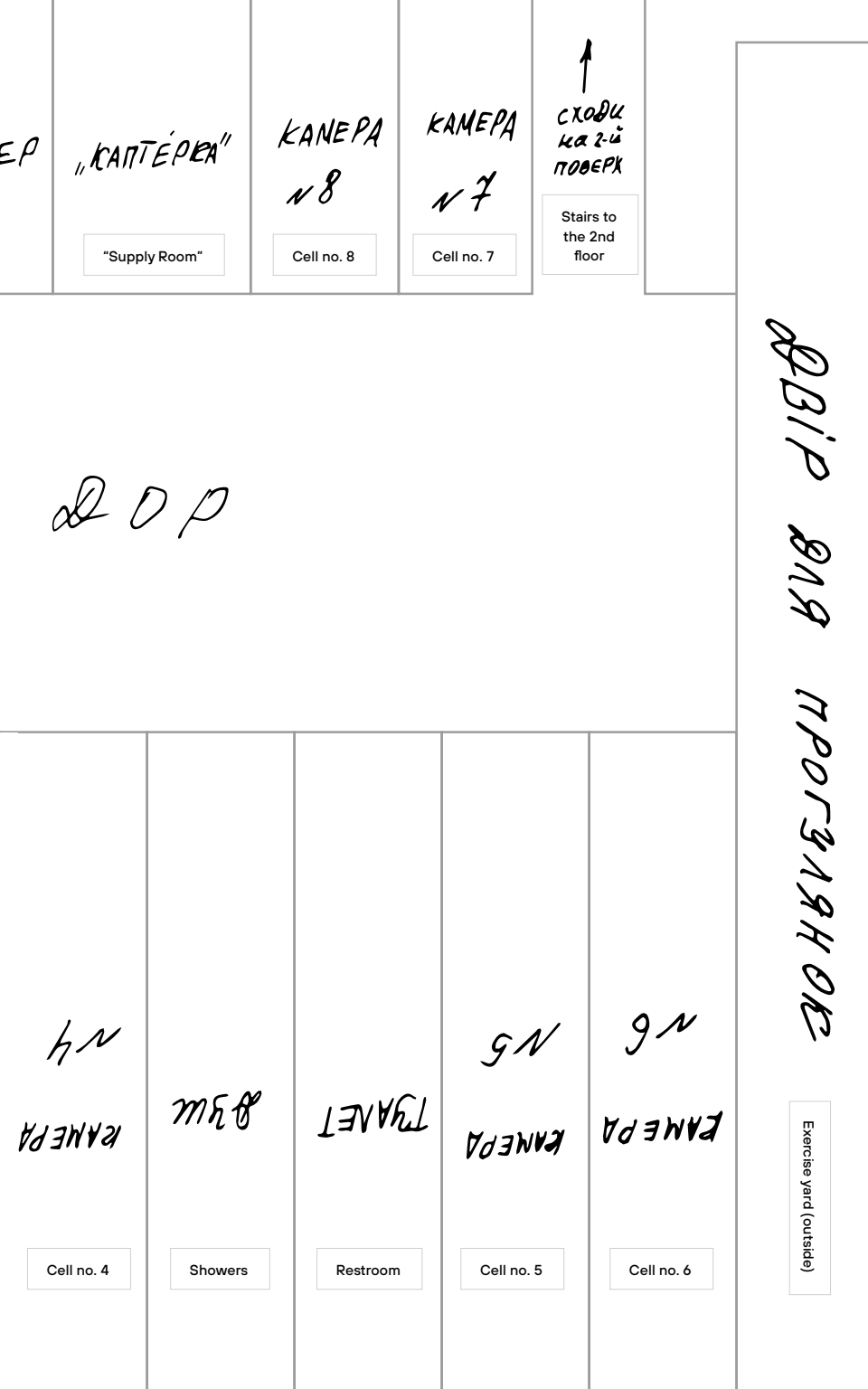
Cell no. 1

КАМЕРА
N2

Cell no. 2

КАМЕРА
N3

Cell no. 3



I was moving toward the door slowly, trying to maneuver the bag on my head so that I could at least see the floor, when I heard another command: "Take the bag off!"

This was another trick Palych played brilliantly. The bag, you see, was an inextricable part of life for all newcomers. Everyone there wore a hood all the time. They once summoned a guy upstairs to perform some job—to move bricks from one place to another in a wheelbarrow or something. Palych wouldn't let him take the hood off even to work. That was part of his intimidation strategy, of course, and it also provided a means to reward someone by letting them go without the hood, thus indicating that they were in favor. For me, however, that one instance remained an exception, and I wore the hood for the next eight months, even to the exercise yard located forty-five feet from the cell.

I must admit that I was less scared with the hood on than when I took it off. I faced a very tall man, dressed in camo and holding an AK-47. He grabbed me by the neck and held me up against the wall while closing the door with his other hand. He was so massive that I wondered why he bothered with the machine gun at all.

It turned out that our cell wasn't the only room in the basement. I saw two more doors, one leading to the disciplinary unit, known as the Cooler, and the other into a solitary cell. The man's fingers tightened on my neck again, and he slowly dragged me up the stairs. I thought once more that wearing the hood was preferable because it didn't let you see how hopeless everything looked: the vault-like door with a twist lock like in a submarine, the thick walls, the

damp darkness of it all. Yet what I was about to see did even more to rob me of any hope for reason.

The giant in camo and combat boots delivered me to a room with a couch. On the couch lounged a heavysset man, who was dressed in shorts, a T-shirt, and beach flip-flops. He was also armed with a machine gun and seemed to be playing with it rather absentmindedly. My escort sat on the couch next to him but assumed a formal posture: this was his superior. I sat in the chair I was pointed to. I had no idea who these people were or what was about to happen.

“Introduce yourself: your name and the charges.”

In the space between us stood a giant flat-screen monitor divided into a dozen rectangles, each of which showed ant-sized inmates in different cells, including in our basement. It was here, in the Monitoring Room, that management made its decisions: who was going to be beaten and put under the cot tonight, and who would be spared.

I gave my name and charges as instructed and inquired, “You must be the shift leader?”

The man in the T-shirt grinned and said, “I’m the leader, period. I’m the Boss here.”

Only then did I realize who I was talking to. This man in rubber flip-flops and a funny T-shirt, with his gun, was the infamous monster I had heard about. Amazingly, he continued to address me with a formal “you,” like any polite adult, except he kept whirling his machine gun as if it were a plastic toy. In the course of that first encounter, Palych never raised his voice or insulted me, though

it was his well-known habit to address inmates by a variety of derogatory terms, the least offensive of which were “shit” and “faggot.”

“Tell me honestly,” he said. “Have you had suicidal thoughts?”

My astonishment at being asked this question was a clear consequence of my lack of experience on the inside, where everyone knows that walls have ears. Obviously, Palych had at his disposal not only my file from the Office, but also reports by covert observers that included people in my basement cell. I understood that lying was useless and said to him honestly, “Yes, I have.”

“You shouldn’t do that here. This is a warning. It will only make things worse for you. Is that clear?”

I nodded in affirmation, even though I couldn’t imagine at that moment what could be worse than suicide and how I was to interpret his warning. Two years later, a man who, at that moment, could be seen on the monitor calmly walking around would end up in the Cooler next door. By then he would become so disturbed that he would start cutting his face with a dull metal spoon and throwing himself against the bars of the basement windows. In the Cooler, he would break off shards of tile and slice open his wrists. He would be bandaged up and then chained by his uninjured hand to the Cooler’s door to spend another week there, immobile in his own waste, before the guards, mocking him all the way, would move him to the pretrial detention facility. That’s what Palych meant when he told me that things could be made worse, but I didn’t have the hindsight of two years at that moment.

Palych got what he wanted: the immediate impression he made on me was radically different from what I would encounter a few weeks later. Another reason he was initially decent to people was to give them only mild things to report should they get lucky and be transferred out of Isolation quickly. They would never have witnessed the ugly reality of the place.

THE HOUR OF THE QUIET ONES

In a few short weeks I would see Palych in another light, when he arrived in our basement in the middle of the night with a favored inmate and ordered one of us to be taken upstairs to be tortured. Within days I had fixed that event in my memory precisely, but I did not dare put it down in writing until I knew Palych had himself been thrown in a basement cell. Eventually these notes would be confiscated, along with everything I wrote in Isolation, and I wouldn't be able to recreate the text until I was in a regular prison. I present it here as a stand-alone account, the way I committed it to memory in the basement. It contains everything you need to know about the man for now, and the events of that particular night. Here it is.

* * *

Four-and-a-half years in, I have nothing to say about this war. The huge fan's blades, the noise it made, the oscillating light emanating from a thick glass bulb mounted in a wire





cage—it would go dull, almost out, and then grow brighter again, so bright it hurt our eyes... All this—the light, the fan, the noise—is like one big living thing. It watches us, studies us at all hours of the day—one of this war’s numberless faces.

We had lain down for the night under the damp, peeling ceiling, when the door flew open, and we had to leap to our feet. They started beating one of us right there, in the basement cell, and then dragged him upstairs, screaming. A few minutes later we heard him shrieking so desperately that even the hum of the fan could not drown out his voice.

“You, journalist, take off your hood.”

I pulled the bag off my head and saw a stout-built man dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, utterly drunk. Swaying on his feet, he studied me with great concentration while the other inmates stood in the background, hooded, faces to the wall.

“What do you need?”

“Nothing, comrade supervisor! No complaints, everything is fine, Sir!” I managed to say.

He squinted at me for a while longer, still swaying, and then repeated, “What’d ya need?”

I sensed this was an order rather than a question and ventured, “A shower, Sir. It’s been a long time since we’ve been taken to bathe.”

It had been two weeks, in fact. In the basement, one could only dream about showers.

“You’ll have a shower then. A hot one. Tomorrow,” he said, apparently without hesitation. “Do you smoke?”

“No, Sir.”

“Attaboy. Let’s go talk.”

We moved to a far corner of the cell, where there was a metal desk and benches bolted to the floor. As soon as we sat down, the door opened, and the guards shoved into the cell the man whom we had heard screaming so terribly upstairs. His hands were tied with duct tape. He stumbled and fell to his knees, quivering like a spring that had been squeezed and then let go.

“Bring him here and untie him.”

The guards made the man sit next to me on the bench and gave him a glass with some drops of Corvalol, that pervasive valerian-based medication developed in the USSR in the 1960s as a copy of the German drug Valocordin. It contains an anti-seizure drug, the barbiturate phenobarbital, and was designed to treat all kinds of cardiovascular episodes.

“I didn’t enjoy doing this. But there’s no choice, journalist,” he said again.

At the moment, I didn’t grasp the significance of his words, but he said it again: “There’s no choice. Just sign whatever they want you to sign and off you go to your prisoner swap.”

I glanced at the cellmate I’d barely met yesterday: a middle-aged man with his hands shaking. There had been wires attached to them just a few minutes ago; he could barely hold the glass, trying not to spill the Corvalol drops.

“If you’ve landed here, there’s no limit. You’ll sign everything eventually anyway. Why lose your health in the process? Explain this to him, journalist.”

He addressed everyone in the cell, but was speaking to me only.

"I know you, journalist, will write that we beat you in here, that we tortured you. That we're animals, not people."

I wanted to object in order to calm him down a bit, but I didn't have a chance to speak.

"Mark my words," he went on, speaking increasingly more rapidly and clearly despite being drunk, "this entire war hinges on people like me. People who can step over everything: the screaming, the snot, and those silly articles you vamp up about us."

With every word, his disdain for those who were not capable of conscious sadism grew stronger.

"In here I'm god, the Boss, and the judge. Sure, I torture people. But I get results. I'm just quietly doing my job here, and no one can do it any better. That's just the times we live in. Do you get it, journalist?"

Abruptly, he fell silent. He left with "Have a blast" by way of goodbye, and the cell filled with the familiar hum of the fan. The blades pulled moist air outside. If you stood close to them, you could sometimes smell the rain.

In the morning, they bathed us.

* * *

The mask was off. Isolation's boss no longer pretended to be a softy. A few months later he stopped by our cell, number four, where there were four of us. After lights-out, we heard other doors opening, muffled cries of pain, sounds of beating, and shouts of "On the floor, you shit!"

This meant that Palych had gotten drunk again and was roaming Isolation looking for fun and victims.

One of his special gifts was his ability to unlock a cell door in a blink, so that the inmates would often have no chance to jump up and put their hoods on. For a long time, Palych's favorite entertainment was to torment a prisoner assigned to an upper bunk. When ordered, this man was supposed to jump down, hood already on his head, before the door opened. Mind you, other than this particular person, everyone else who slept on an upper bunk was permitted to comply by kneeling on their cots, faces away from the door. For a long time Palych's unfortunate target, who already lived in constant anxiety, didn't dare lie down and spent his nights sitting on his bunk, hood on his head, listening to every little noise outside. Most of the time he still failed to meet Palych's expectations for which he was routinely beaten.

That's what happened that night. I was already wearing every piece of clothing I could find in the hope of some minimal protection during the beating that was surely coming. The door to our cell flew open so suddenly that even I, who slept on a bottom bunk, only had a chance to sit up—and my poor elderly neighbor on the top bunk, naturally, didn't have a prayer. He was immediately whaled in the head with a fist. In the morning we'd discover that he had partially lost his hearing from that night's beating.

We were ordered to kneel with our hands behind our heads, at which point other inmates, favored by Palych, swooped into the cell and began kicking us. Then they dragged my bunkmate out into the hallway. All things





considered, we got off easily that night. A man in the cell next door was not only beaten but shoved under the bunk and made to bark like a dog.

Women suffered beatings routinely as well. On one of Palych's drunk nights, I heard an elderly woman being pulled out of cell number three next door. The guards took her to the Monitoring Room, where Palych beat her personally and extensively while the guard's shift leader did his best, by joking and mocking the "old hag," to make him stop. Eventually, the shift leader was able to take her back to her cell, with Palych shouting after him drunkenly, "Don't you dare help her! Let her crawl on her own!"

If one could step back from the specific events for a moment, one would be well justified in wondering about the exact nature of the relationship between the Boss and the guards. In other words, was Isolation staffed exclusively with sadistic psychopaths, each of whom enjoyed torturing and humiliating other people? Clearly, that's not possible. Whatever their motives, the guards remain culpable for nights like that one, when they gave their silent assent to the abuse. Most employees did meet their "torture quota" when they were so ordered, usually whenever a new inmate was brought in and thrown straight onto the torture table in the basement. But not all of them participated in the night raids. Moreover, I found bullet holes in the wall of the exercise yard: Palych's own posse fired near him on one such night in an attempt to snap him out of his drunken rage before he killed someone. Eventually, it would be the guards who would bring about his removal: they would be the ones to call the Boss's bosses on that memorable day of February 18, 2018.

That was the night when the stick Palych had been bending for so long finally snapped. It cost many people their health, including the man who was made to “ride in the tub” upstairs that night. “Tub rides” were another form of nocturnal entertainment: they’d put a man in an empty large round metal tub and shove him as hard as possible against the wall, beating and kicking him in between the rides. On his last night in Isolation, Palych lost all semblance of control. In the middle of the night, we heard loud rock music, followed promptly by hard blows on every cell door, signaling the beginning of another nightmare. By then I was being held in cell number five—across the hallway from number seven, which housed women—and my cot was the closest to the door. I knew I would take the first blows as soon as the door opened, so I lay under my sheet in layers of warm clothes and prepared myself for a beating or a trip to the basement.

They began with the women that night. Number seven was full of relatively young people—women under the age of thirty. I could hear their moans and the dull thumps of beatings even through the loud music. I heard Palych yelling “Whores!” at them and inviting one of them to give him a blow job.

For the rest of the night, he flew from one cell to another, yet he did not come to number five. Many of my cellmates told me that they thought he didn’t want me in particular to see what he was doing. I doubt it: Palych lost his mind that night and was hardly capable of thinking about me.

In the morning, everyone who wasn't crushed the night before was sent out to work. As was their habit, they left me in my cell, and from there I heard Palych, still drunk, for the last time. The shift leader appeared to comment on the beatings because I heard him mention to his superior that a man in number eight had his eyes punched until they were swollen shut: his entire face was a single bruise. That's when I heard Palych drunkenly mutter, "That's not a problem—not a problem." Yet, as it turned out, it was over only for me.

In the same haze of his growing hangover, Palych went to check on his "plantations": that's what we called the parts of the industrial area where prisoners were taken to work. After a while, I heard screaming outside the window, followed by machine gun fire. Another minute or so later, the hallway filled with running inmates who were being rushed back into their cells. One of my cellmates came in with a bruise under one eye and a tooth knocked out. Palych had gone on attacking inmates while they worked, which prompted the guards to call his supervisor and that's who had fired a machine gun.

From that morning on, I did not see or hear Palych. He was initially kept locked up in our basement; eventually, a separate trailer was allocated for him outside. Inmates he had beaten just a few days ago were bringing him food. The change in the administration's attitude toward him was nothing short of radical: an inmate whom Palych had sexually assaulted was offered a chance to do the same to him. Palych was now powerless and helpless, and those who worked outside reported that the men he

had once supervised now yelled at him to get a move on with his refuse bucket.

In the end he simply disappeared, vanished until the following summer, when inmates returning from outdoor labor spotted him going down to the basement with some other men. He would be seen in this odd role many more times. Men like him do not go away; they will continue to be used (and useful) until the day they die. It's so much more convenient to have someone else do the torturing, especially when that someone is a man who is "capable of stepping over everything."

If you wear a very tight hat and then pull it off suddenly, you'll still feel it squeezing your head for a while. I can't know what other prisoners felt when they realized they could just go to sleep at night. I felt like someone who'd just pulled off a tight hat: I kept expecting the administration to send someone to replace Palych, or even restore him to his job. I expected more cries from the women's cell and more torture accompanied by loud singing. But a month passed, and then another, and everything remained quiet. Yes, people were still being tortured. Yes, men were brought to our cell covered in electrical burns. Yes, inmates were still made to "hold up the wall" until they collapsed off their swollen feet. Yet, despite all this, we felt as if silence fell now.

MADNESS OR NORMALCY?

The peculiarities of an inmate's mental state in Isolation depended on how much pressure the administration and other inmates put on them, as well as his or her place in the local hierarchy. As I watched those who were subject to the most severe forms of physical and emotional violence, I could see their personalities change right before my eyes, as they warped to the shape determined by their circumstances.

I remember an inmate who belonged to the caste of the so-called lowered. Such people literally could not be touched, and since it was prohibited to strike them with one's hand (though the prohibition was often broken), they were beaten with whatever objects were within reach, and, on one occasion, even a chair, which broke to pieces in the process. This individual was not allowed to approach the common dining table, could not use the shared utensils, and wasn't permitted to hand anything to another inmate. It was this everyday psychological abuse that caused the most dramatic changes in his personality.

Next to his cot hung a beret and a cardboard gun: he was to put on the beret and hold the gun anytime he was ordered to sing for the administration. The gun was inscribed with a “serial number”—a string of two dozen random numbers and curses—which this man was expected to have memorized and be able to recite at any time of day or night. A single error in the sequence of numbers and letters prompted another severe kicking. As other forms of punishment, he could find himself being sent under the cot and ordered to bark like a dog or count all the floor tiles there. He referred to himself as an artist and handled these terrors by fully taking on the role of a “guard-dog singer,” the theatrics of which I suspect were precisely what protected him from insanity.

Whenever I spoke to him in Isolation’s basement during the rare hours when he didn’t have to act the court jester, I was amazed to see that he was more depressed precisely then—when he was forced to face the reality of his condition. When asked about his position in the community, or the abuse and humiliation he endured, he would turn glassy eyed and justify what was happening by referring to god’s will or citing the severity of the charges against him. He never talked about any of this willingly. “I don’t care anymore,” he would say.

Prisoners sentenced to life in Isolation or to death by firing squad also engaged in rationalization as a defense mechanism. I met two individuals like that, both of whom held high hopes of being freed when the fighting intensified or being liberated by the Ukrainian forces in some other way, despite the fact that both had been members

of the anti-Ukrainian “self-defense” forces. Irrespective of the fact that both had unquestionably committed multiple crimes, neither one allowed that his imprisonment was in any way just or fair—all while not denying what they had done. Moreover, one of these men kept wondering out loud why we, the Ukrops—the pejorative term for Ukrainians that Russians and the separatists used, and which could be translated as “the Dills”—were being released in prisoner exchanges while he, who had fought for this very “republic,” had to remain in jail. The idea of our freedom gave him hope that he himself would be freed, never mind that our circumstances had absolutely nothing in common.

Such people, I was curious to observe, maintained their mental stability by interpreting any scrap of news that reached our cells in their favor, in the spirit of “It’ll all be over soon,” even when the reported event itself was trivial or irrelevant, such as a meeting of Russian and Japanese diplomats. This was precisely why they were often in higher spirits than inmates who had every reason to believe they were next to be swapped and that the next prisoner exchange was imminent. On the other hand, having survived torture, solitary confinement, and humiliation, and serving a life sentence, such people often experienced a “blank-slate” state in which they were unable to remember what they had just read or paraphrase a sentence they had just heard because they were completely absorbed by thoughts about the outside. One of them was going nearly mad in the confines of our cell, but whenever he opened a book, he could focus for no

more than half a minute, after which he would curse, slap the book shut, and berate himself for being incapable of reading even a few pages. His mind was utterly obsessed with his circumstances. Such people lived in torment until they could obtain another piece of news and use it to replace reality with hope.

Another form of mental defense manifested itself in complete indifference to the suffering of other inmates. I experienced this firsthand. One day my cellmate and I prepared oatmeal we'd been sent from home for dinner, and right as we were about to eat, they started torturing someone next door. Previously, people had been tortured in the basement, with the images broadcast full screen in the Monitoring Room, with the volume turned up so that everyone could hear it. But by the fall of 2017, this practice had been abandoned, and torture was carried out



on the same floor where people were held. We could tell they were using electric shock again by the characteristic sound of stomping. They called it the Running Man: wires were attached to a person's toes, so that, when shocked, the victim screamed and helplessly stomped his feet on the floor. My cellmate went pale and couldn't swallow a single spoonful. I, on the other hand, after about twenty minutes of this, sat down to dinner with the argument that the torture didn't sound like it was about to end, but our porridge was about to cool into a ball of goo.

On another occasion, one of our cellmates was not returned to the cell by lights-out, which was a clear indication that he was going to be tortured (by then this was mostly being done at night). I recall another cellmate, who had only been there for about a month, growing very concerned and repeatedly saying, "I wonder how Sergei is doing." We all knew that Sergei at that moment was taped to the torture table and, most likely, there were wires being attached to his genitals (which, as we later learned, was exactly what happened). However, by then I had spent a year and a half in Isolation, and the endless stream of such Sergeis had not only washed me clean of the last vestiges of empathy, but they had also started to annoy me. Not a day passed when someone wasn't tortured and returned half dead, with deep burns on his hands and feet. So, when I heard the lament about Sergei again, I said tersely that, even if they opened the tray slot and shoved his severed head through it, I would just turn over on my cot to face the wall. Obviously, this answer painted me as completely morally incompetent

in the eyes of my cellmate who was still processing the question of how one human being could torture another. But I no longer felt guilty before him or the divine, just as I no longer felt that the notion of a so-called “human being” held any relevance for me.

Of course, it wasn’t just Sergei—who would indeed be returned to the cell half dead—that I could not face that night. And my cellmate, who was still capable of feeling empathy, was not the true object of my anger. I could not face the thoughts of my mother, who had been crying at night for a year while taking care of her elderly parents and who had spent her last cash on food that would not reach me. And of the woman I loved, whom I didn’t have a chance to see before being captured and who was now compelled to wait for me not knowing what I was going through. Nor could I possibly face the wife of the unfortunate man who was beaten to death in the police van, and who was told her husband had gone to Russia and disappeared there. Or of the young woman Palych raped, who had a husband and a young child on the outside. I raged against myself. I hated myself for all this, for being made to know these things. Whom could I tell about this? And how? If I let myself think about all of it, I’d feel torn apart. I wouldn’t last a day. Curled up into a ball under the blanket on my cot, I hid from the rest of the world that so often comes to find prisoners at night.

This “mental separatism,” as I referred to such distancing, was evident in other inmates, too, when they laughed hysterically at the mention of a torn scrotum or sexual violence. Whereas an ordinary person would

react to such information with disgust, hatred, or fear, Isolation's prisoners joked and laughed till they had tears in their eyes. The concept of normalcy became relative; it was impossible to absorb daily torture and abuse on an ordinary person's terms and not go insane. When the mind cannot process a situation, it begins to normalize terror to preserve itself. This produces the indifference and even irony toward other people's suffering.

The reverse of this was the sense of obligation one felt with respect to those employees of Isolation that didn't abuse or torture us but were "just there to do a job," as some of us put it. I think the underlying psychological chain went like this: when the enemy treated us humanely, we were grateful, and the gratitude produced a sense of indebtedness and guilt about not being able to repay the favor. Many inmates were determined to tell the world about what was happening in Isolation once they were free, but then hesitated because such testimony would harm the one guard who said "Good morning!" instead of cursing or beating them. The distinction between "the good" and "the bad" among our enemies prompted some prisoners to care for the former and hate the latter even more. The more the old "iron door syndrome" dissipated—one that forced every prisoner's muscles to contract involuntarily whenever the previous administration even touched the lock, because every knock on the cell's iron door meant a new beating—the stronger the Stockholm syndrome set in.

However, our extreme circumstances did not warp our emotional response all the time. Sometimes people would respond reasonably: they'd cry. Among the men in

Isolation, I only witnessed crying—actual desperate sobbing—twice. Moans and cries of pain were as common as fresh burns and broken ribs, but to see a stoic man break down like that was much harder.

The first time this happened was in the summer of 2017. I was sharing a cell with a Muslim man, who received a food parcel from his family. Most of the food had been stolen, as we expected, and the man unpacked what was left for the cell to share impassively. Suddenly, among the few toiletries, he found a note that the guards had somehow missed. He stepped aside to read it, and a moment later we heard a wild wail. He cried desperately, loudly, and in the silence of our basement cell his weeping was mournful and hopeless. It turned out the note didn't contain any terrible news. His child had written it. A man who stood silently and quietly with a hood on his head during night raids was undone by the letters of a child's cursive.

The second instance occurred later, in cell number four, and involved an individual I would've least expected to do anything like cry. He came from a "sealer" and had served, in sum, twenty-one and a half years in maximum security. A criminal by conviction, he was covered in tattoos of church domes and the Madonna. He had spent his life knifing people and despising any authority, be it of a prison or a government, yet he curled up in the corner of the cell weeping when he found a note from his mother hidden in *salo*—a slab of pork fat. A mere hour earlier, he had been sauntering around the cell with an ex-con's typical bravado, yet there he was, transformed in an instant

from a fifty-year-old gangster into a little boy. He crumpled the note in his hand and whimpered through tears, “Oh, Mommy, you have to wait for me again.”

Such outbursts of pure feeling proved that, under the shell of apathy or a particular role a prisoner was forced to play in Isolation, people preserved their ability to experience emotion and find meaning when it was attached to their families. Those we loved remained our North Star, giving us reason to survive the tears and pain.

The overall strategy of mental abuse in Isolation was based on the simple mechanics of response conditioning. While I doubt that the administration had engaged in any dedicated study of behaviorism, its methods of handling prisoners were consistent with that approach. The masters of this place did not, in fact, see us as any different from dogs or other animals. They were endlessly inventive of new “entertainments” that would inculcate fear in response to a particular action.

For a long stretch of my time in Isolation, the place wasn’t equipped with a bell or any other public signal for lights-out or wake-up. A bell would eventually be installed, but, in the meantime, its absence provided another source of entertainment for the administration. Neither did most cells have a radio or a clock in the fall of 2017, and our number four was no exception. The only way to tell time was to listen for the factory whistle of the Donetsk Metallurgical Plant, which was not far from us. The whistles came at set hours, including at 10 p.m. and 6 a.m., corresponding to lights-out and wake-up at Isolation. The problem was that the whistle

was often weak and could barely be heard, and Isolation's boss loved nothing more than to catch through his many cameras some poor soul late by twenty seconds, which would then prompt a beating or a trip to the Cooler (and often both). The evening whistle generated additional fear and anxiety because a prisoner had often just undressed and gone to bed when he was roused with the bang of the rifle butt on the cell door and the loud cry "Rise and shine!" signaling the beginning of the night's "spa treatments." Number five next door once spent the entire night on their feet, without leave to use the toilet, some with bags on their heads.

My own nervous tension during that fall of 2017 reached a point wherein I would jump up suddenly in the middle of the night and rouse the entire cell, because I thought I had heard the factory whistle. I was not alone in this affliction: an outside observer could be forgiven for taking us for four mad men who leap off their cots in the middle of the night, dress hastily, freeze at attention listening through the silence, and then go back to bed.

By the same token, collective singing became a new tradition in Isolation. One day the tray slot opened and Palych's hand shoved a piece of paper through it. "Memorize this," we heard him say. "You'll sing it in an hour. Anyone who misses a word goes to the Cooler." And the tray slot closed.

Our appointed cell warder was holding the lyrics to the Soviet World War II song "The Sacred War." An hour later the entire population of Isolation was indeed led outside. A few new people stood in the yard with hoods on

their heads. Palych sat on the porch and closely watched as we all sang to determine if anyone was slacking.

From that day on, Soviet-era songs not only became an inextricable part of many cells' lives, but they were also used as a means of torture for the newcomers. Whenever the guards brought a new prisoner over from the Office and Isolation's torturers went to work on him, people in the cells next to the Monitoring Room had to leap to their feet and burst into a Soviet song, which conveyed to the rest of the facility that yet another person now had wires attached to his or her body. Psychologically, it was easier to sing than to listen: at least when you were singing, you could distract yourself with the words. Hearing the songs only brought on fear, which was exactly what the administration wanted. Then again, it's hard to say whose terror and humiliation were truly abysmal—ours as we sang “Let's crush the mad oppressors, these slaughterers of men” over another human being's screams of pain, or those of the poor individual with the wire-wrapped fingers who could not comprehend what was happening and heard people sing whenever he was tortured.

Finally, one of the most easily overlooked levers of humiliation was the administration's commitment to constant obscenity in addressing the prisoners. The Boss was particularly keen on this. Torture sessions were no exception: combined, the electric shock, the unprintable verbal abuse, and the accusations of “treason against the motherland” or “against the Donbas people” were meant to put the victim in a fog of fear and guilt. Torture,

however, is but a brief intervention when you consider that the verbal abuse went on every day for months, even years. A prisoner might not be physically harmed but addressed exclusively as “scum” or “faggot,” to which he had to respond. Failure to comply was immediately corrected with a truncheon or a trip to the Cooler, so any reasonable person would comply with the terms of the game and, after a while, start losing his will power, gradually grow into the role of “scum” or another demeaning epithet he was addressed with. People were not even aware of what this did to them.

The annals of science hold accounts of real burns sustained when a person touched a cool object that he firmly believed to be red hot. Similarly, a perfectly healthy person in the middle of a flu or another outbreak is likely to find himself showing symptoms of the prevalent disease. A similar force was at work in Isolation: when you treat a person every day in a manner that denies them any human qualities, it is only a matter of time before they lose their own sense of will and dignity, and merely grin when you call them a faggot.

TIME IN CAPTIVITY

You wouldn't know this, but doing time is a skill. Beyond the shared behavioral code on the inside, you have to have the ability to endure the passage of time itself. Time is your greatest enemy here. Neither the administration nor other inmates pose the kind of existential threat that unoccupied time does: with nothing to do, even the most pragmatic and grounded person starts to dwell on his or her circumstances. And whereas the calamities that the administration throws at you make you mobilize and fight, the free time, paradoxically, is actually what causes depression and suicidal thoughts.

Consider this: it was only when I got sick for the first time in Isolation—in a warm cell, with a regular cot and a blanket—that I realized that I hadn't so much as sneezed once during my six weeks in the frigid basement of the Office, where it was so cold in summer that you could see your breath and where mold covered the walls. I was in

constant physical shock: I was regularly tortured, and starved on top of that, but to deal with the cold I had to spend five to six hours a day just walking from one wall of the cell to another to generate minimal warmth. In other words, the human body *in extremis* calls up resources of endurance previously quite unknown.

The same likely applies to one's mental state. When you are on your feet for several hours in the middle of the night, upright as a candle and praying that the door doesn't open and you don't get beaten again, there's simply no room for reflection. Your faculties of emotion, cognition, and will are laser-focused on the small noises outside the cell—just like your body, which contracts like a single muscle in anticipation of an attack. Survival is the only meaningful goal.

Unoccupied time in a room with bars on the window and a lock on the door tends to erode one's focus. Time becomes an X-ray machine that reveals the essence of a person: their purpose, their hopes, the meaning they find. You realize you ought to describe these things as "former," of the past. Let me provide an illustration.

The wake-up call comes at 6 a.m. You get up and wait for your turn at the sink or the toilet. After an hour, the tray slot opens, and you're given a plate with a bit of food. We can disregard the five-minute exercise walk. That, in a nutshell, is your day. The room is about fifteen feet by twenty-two feet. It houses twelve men. The faces don't change; the bars on the windows remain the same; the lightbulb is as dull as yesterday. This goes on for months, or even years.

For those who have never been on the inside, you find yourself in shock within a few hours. Everyone is silent. One guy might be reading, another may just be sitting on his cot with his face in his hands. Someone else might be praying in a whisper. All conversation has been exhausted: you already know one another's life stories in great detail. The door doesn't open. Nothing happens. Even if you're just doing time, without the "bells and whistles" unique to Isolation, you still have to endure your own self. You have to endure the way you see yourself in another prisoner's eyes, knowing that he went to sleep thinking about a son he hasn't seen in over a year and woke up still thinking about the child, still in the same cell, still surrounded by the same people. It's no wonder he'd rather not look at you. Regardless of what you do with your food, how you try to exercise, or how much you focus on staying positive, the system wears you down from the inside, hour by hour. You lose weight, your face grows pale and gaunt, you eat and speak less and less. You're reduced to basic existence.

Many inmates only make references to their previous lives on the outside: they take themselves out of the present and don't even mention the future. Their language comes to reflect this, and the difference is most stark between those who've done a year and the newcomers. The former speak in the past tense—they knew, loved, liked, were able to—even when referencing something that should still hold true, such as their food preferences. The person is alive right there in front of you, but he "used to really like crab dip," as opposed to "really

liking it" in general. His speech is devoted to the past, as if in the present he can only recall earlier experiences, not have new ones. The newcomers, by contrast, still make plans and worry about overdue utility bills.

Time can harden a person; in a place like Isolation, people harden even more. There came a day when I began to view every new person through a screen of cynicism and emotional apathy. This feeling was particularly acute when I was faced with people who had nothing to do with the war or the criminal world—people that often initiated a conversation with the formal "you," which is otherwise uncommon on the inside. I saw their clean clothes, their fresh haircuts, the absence of fear in their eyes, and wondered how many days it would take to erase all of that. They were about to face things that they couldn't even have fathomed existed here, in downtown Donetsk. They were about to be turned into slabs of lifeless meat, bodies with spines wanting to twist themselves free from the current of electricity—a human organism only capable of begging that its wife and daughter not be "passed around," as the administration would promise every man that arrived in its basement. And soon there would be no formal "you." The same person would spend hours and days staring at the floor in silence. Eventually, when he signs what they want him to sign, whatever's left of the man is given some noodles and a pair of socks (all that's left from a pilfered care package sent by his family) to the inevitable refrains of "See, if you're decent to us, we'll be decent to you." This would go on for months—at times years. If you dwell on all of it, you'll go mad. That's

why it's imperative to convert time into other, quantifiable things: the number of steps around the cell, books, or physical exercises. Obviously, your circumstances are limited, but even in solitary confinement in the basement I managed to jog for twenty minutes a day—in a cell that had nothing but mold and wet air.

Nonetheless, knowing and understanding all of this doesn't always guarantee oneself positive results. Aside from the pervading depression that affected most inmates, I would have a severe panic attack a few times a month if I let myself contemplate how much longer I might spend in captivity. I would suddenly find myself unable to breathe in the middle of the night and would feign needing to use the toilet, which was next to a window that was cracked open. I would gulp the meager whiffs of night air, fully aware that there was no lack of oxygen in the cell itself and the problem was in my head.

There's another important thing to remember about the passage of time: while the prisoner may have the benefit of a clear verdict (say, "espionage"), he is compelled to exist in the limbo between a possible prisoner exchange the next day and one that won't happen for another year. I'm exaggerating only somewhat: this time warp fundamentally alters your mental state. A convict knows how long his sentence is, so he can pace himself. A political prisoner exists in a sticky bog of years and hours. In terms of the stages of grief, this person can never reach acceptance, stuck at the stage of bargaining that would occasionally turn into depression. How could I, having been sentenced to two terms of fifteen years,

accept thirty years of incarceration as inevitable—especially when I was living with the knowledge of regular prisoner swaps? The lack of certainty, the absence of any timescale turns a day into a month and sometimes—like, for instance, before Christmas—makes a month pass as quickly as a single day. A cellmate of mine had a great metaphor for this condition: it's like being a donkey with a carrot hung in front of its nose on a stick that is attached to the donkey's body—with every step the donkey takes toward the carrot, it moves away.

THE BLUE LIGHT: TO KILL YOURSELF OR NOT?

The question of suicide in such liminal conditions as can be brought on by incarceration or wartime captivity reaches beyond the realm of mental health. It is an existential, rather than a mechanical challenge. Whereas under the normal circumstances of everyday life suicidal thoughts are a cause to consider hospitalization or, at a minimum, therapy, how can the same measure of deviation from the norm be applied, say, to a tank driver's choice to put a bullet through his own head rather than die slowly and painfully as his tank burns? In an environment where physical suffering is combined with deep trauma, suicidal thoughts become more of a norm than a deviation: they become a way out of suffering.

I set out to write this book as an attempt to capture life in the Isolation facility, but I must return for a moment to the basement of the Office, where I spent six weeks before my stay at the "Donetsk Dachau." I must do this because it was there that I first contemplated

suicide in practical terms and the question of my own death ceased to be purely theoretical. The question, in fact, became compressed and embodied in a single shard of glass, which I intended to use to kill myself.

In that solitary cell in the basement of the local “Ministry of State Security,” I learned two things: one, that people there were living a near-animalistic existence; and two, that there were people on the other side of my wall that had been living this kind of existence for six or eight months, now and then brushing off flakes of peeling dead skin (as I soon would be as well). They had no exercise, saw no sun, and felt no wind. They had no visitors, were fed barely enough to stay alive, and weren’t even interrogated anymore. Everything had been taken from them, even calendars, leaving my next-door neighbor keeping track of time by observing the changes in the few twigs of a scraggly tree growing outside the entrance hall: he could see it if he managed to peek out from under his hood on his way to the bathroom. We were taken to shower once every three weeks. Food was often spoiled. For dinner we sometimes got only a cup of boiling water.

Inside my cell, I could see my own breath as I exhaled in June. The place was littered with bits of wet debris that had been there since the previous fall or winter. A couple of bottles filled with urine lay on the ground—I learned to use them to keep warm at night by clutching them in my hands. The walls were covered in mold, which was scored with dozens of vertical lines—likely someone’s attempt to keep a calendar. If you had to empty your bowels during the day, you had no

choice but to do so into one of the disposable food trays and keep it with you until you were taken outside for a few minutes in the evening. An old daybed served as my cot, and that was a dramatic improvement over the circumstances of my predecessors, one of whom slept on top of a discarded door—or sometimes under, with it leaned against a wall. Those who could get their hands on newspapers balled them up and put them into their pants for warmth.

I think I could be forgiven for deciding that this wasn't life. At this point, the option of suicide was one of two things that still set us apart from animals, the other being a sense of humor. I remember the time we got some kind of rice porridge for dinner: it was foamy and smelled rotten even through the plastic film that covered the trays. I called out to my neighbor to jokingly ask what he was dining on. He first cursed and then said he had been served a steak. The prisoner in the cell to the other side of me then hoarsely chimed in that he was having chicken-flavored noodles. I told them I was having potatoes *au gratin*. Even if animals were able to understand humor, they surely wouldn't be able to joke so bitterly when all the food you have is three ounces of boiling water.

When I learned from these men that they had seemingly been forgotten here, I resolved that I wouldn't turn into a vegetable should the same happen to me. Let my captors take everything away from me, but they won't rob me of my final choice. At the time—having been tortured, with my mother constantly on my mind, living among

men who almost howled with despair—I developed the conviction that suicide, the choice to leave on one's own terms, was the last shred of human dignity left for me.

The conditions of our imprisonment wouldn't make it simple. Aside from being monitored round the clock, I had a very limited array of potential tools at my disposal. We were searched every other day, and with each search, our nearly empty cells were turned over as well. As a result, all I had was a small screw, a pencil stub, and a piece of toilet paper that a fellow inmate had given me on our way to the bathroom. I also had a plastic spoon that was cracked through the middle and wouldn't be getting replaced on principle, forcing me to slurp my soup almost like a dog, as it was useless for scooping up liquids.

At one point, I felt as though I was losing my hearing and wondered if the problem was the quantity of wax in my ears. This presented a dilemma: should I use my last piece of toilet paper to clean my ears or save it? I decided to use it, but no sooner had I wrapped a bit of paper around the screw and moistened it with hot water than the door flew open, and the guards took it away. They must have thought I was intending to kill myself, and my explanation about my ears did nothing to change their minds. They stood me up against the wall and searched the cell. This left me with the pencil stub. Eventually I would use it to write a few lines on a manila folder, before the administration, by some miracle, decided to let me write freely and even issued me three dozen sheets of paper—which, of course, would eventually be confiscated in Isolation.

After about a month in the basement of the Office, things reached the point I had so dreaded: days passed, and I was no longer being taken upstairs for questioning. The men in the cells on either side of mine told me the same had happened to them: they had been tortured at first and interrogated intensely, and then eventually passed into this “mushroom state,” as they put it. These men were essentially being forgotten in a humid dark basement, fed as little as necessary to not die, and kept in this state for an indefinite period of time, like mushrooms on a farm. Requests and pleas to speak to someone from upstairs or meet with your prosecutor were met with a door slamming back in your face.

I didn’t reach the resolution to not live in this vegetable-like state lightly: I struggled with concern for my family. My physical death itself had by then become quite an appealing option. I had come to believe that I would die in that basement either way, so killing myself would at least give me the opportunity to die while still exercising my free will. However, I had no way of knowing whether my mother was still alive. It was clear by then that I had been “disappeared,” and that could well have broken her weak heart. She was also responsible for my two elderly grandmothers, and I knew that, even if all of them were still alive, the news of my death, whenever it should reach them, would kill them for sure. A moral conundrum lay plainly before me: I had the living example of the men who had been reduced to animalistic existence, and I didn’t wish to join their ranks. The choice to take my life, so I thought, was the last freedom I had.

On the other side of the scales were the lives of my mother and grandmothers, which, too, would end, in a way, if I ended mine.

Eventually, the basement won. I convinced myself that, given my mother's heart condition, she was in all likelihood already dead. I'm certain that this conclusion was the product of my circumstances rather than of logic, because I truly had no information about my mother or any knowledge of how long I was to be kept there.

I asked a prisoner that had been there for eight months whether he had contemplated the point beyond which he couldn't go on. "More than once!" he replied. "I landed here in the fall and told myself, I'll wait until the New Year. Then, during the winter, I moved the goal post a few more times and hung on until spring. Now I've decided to stick around until July. Every time you reset the line, there's a little something to live for, a small hope. That's how we survive."

The conversation convinced me not to play games with myself. I knew that this man had a shard of glass from a soup jar he had broken the preceding winter: he had been hiding it for months, saving it for his hour of need. You will laugh but it was almost impossible to talk him into placing this sliver of glass in the bathroom where I could pick it up, and that wasn't just because it was the only sharp thing in the entire basement. The main reason was that all my talk of human dignity and man's final freedom had led him to believe that I had arrived in the basement as a sign for him—a signal to end it all. I had the hardest time convincing him that I couldn't

possibly serve as *his* sign because of how long he had already been clinging to life. *His* sign would have to be much bigger. What if I were just a final trial for him, sent to test his resolve? What if, once he had passed through this trial, everything would change, as he had dreamed, in July?

Of course, I was cheating here—I didn't believe any of that. But you can answer these types of questions however it works best for you. That's the echo chamber of the situation, its ultimate absurdity. Fate, in any case, would be stranger than fiction. This man, a Russian, would be the guy I would help escape from Isolation a year later, after we had all been transferred there in the wake of my failed suicide attempt. We would leave the basement on June 28, two days before the onset of July. Some would call it providence; others would see the hand of god in it. Either way, the fact that we're both alive and free today is no less unlikely than our chance meeting in that basement.

To make a long story short, that same night he did leave the glass in the bathroom for me, but in the two minutes of privacy allotted us there I couldn't, despite my best effort, find it. There weren't many places to hide it—really, there was only the empty space behind the toilet, and if the glass had been there, I would have seen it right away. Another prisoner had gone to the bathroom before me and, aware of our scheming, most likely just flushed the shard down the toilet and told the guards about it. I can't blame him; the whole basement would have been beaten severely over a suicide.

This was, however, not the end of the story. Every cell was equipped with two lights: the regular one was on during the day, and at night the guards switched on the blue one. In my cell, the blue light was made of thick violet-tinted glass and encased in a metal cage. When it was on, its dull blueish-purple glow invariably plunged me into a deep depression, which was in itself enough to produce suicidal thoughts. Other prisoners lived with this light for six months or longer.

After our bathroom handover fiasco, I decided to break the day light because there was no way I could crack the blue one. I would have to do it at night in order to have some illumination to pick up a suitable shard of glass. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to carry out my plan if I had to look for it longer than a few seconds. The main problem was that we were being monitored around the clock. When the man in the cell next to mine once leaned unwittingly into the camera's blind spot, the entire guard shift showed up within a few minutes to chase after the man they thought had escaped.

Hence, I knew I would have a minute and a half at most before the guards reached my cell. To be sure, my Russian co-conspirator and I had each independently measured this interval, from the front of the Office to the basement door. Here, the escort would have to unlock the basement lock, lead his charges downstairs, and then deal with the cell lock. Given that the guards would be running, all this would take at most just over a minute. Clearly, if I had just sliced my wrists, I wouldn't have enough time to die, so I told myself to aim for the jugular, which was much harder to stomach.

Looking back at that time, I'm astonished at how rational I was. I was obviously not merely in low spirits: depression and the idea of suicide consumed me. And yet I invested great mental energy in reverse-engineering the countdown, checking everything twice and glancing repeatedly at the light above my head. I studied it at night, in the blue glow. I studied it during the day, when it blinded me. My father had found his death in a bottle: he got drunk one night and froze to death under a bench outdoors. In part out of spite for him, and in part out of fear of meeting the same end, I never drank (and still don't). And yet here I was about to beat him: he froze at the age of thirty-six, and I was about to kill myself at twenty-seven. My thoughts were confused; I worked hard to not think about my mother but instead focus all my willpower on the light.

The handover in the bathroom failed on a Monday, and I set the end of my life for that Thursday. Thursday was the day new guard shifts started, and we knew the incoming shift would be diligent about turning on the blue light at night; the outgoing guys would sometimes start leaving the day light on all night out of laziness. On Tuesday, I asked my Russian neighbor to borrow the "wash tub" (which we referred to as *Zanussi*, after the Italian washing machine brand). It was an old, slightly moldy plastic gallon jug, cut off in the middle, and was our only implement for bathing or laundering anything. I wanted to wash my hair and see if I could get any of the dirt and stench off me. This was absurd, of course—to be trying to clean up before killing myself, but at the time I felt as

if I were putting on a parade uniform. I wanted to show them that I wasn't an animal, that they could not reduce me to a thing that lived amidst refuse and mold, a thing that could be forgotten.

I managed to give myself a makeshift bath on Tuesday. The following day, on Wednesday, in the morning, the door to my cell suddenly opened and I saw my interrogator. He ordered us—myself and my immediate neighbors—to pack up quickly. It turned out that the story with the glass shard in the bathroom had been reported to the higher offices, and the powers that be had decided that we would be safer in Isolation—and that's where we were moved.

The Isolation facility and suicide are basically synonymous; in many ways, life there was a mirror image of what it had been like in the Office's basement. Yes, the living conditions were far more comfortable, but the pressure of psychological abuse and physical pain increased by orders of magnitude. You essentially had no time to think: any bit of respite was spent gulping for breath in shock. Cruel things happened at a very fast pace, rarely leaving you time to reflect or feel any emotion about the questions of life and death.

Some of the suicide attempts that occurred while I was in Isolation were precisely that—*attempts*, gestures. One exception was the man who tried to cut his veins with a nail while in post-torture shock. His attempt, too, was foiled: because of constant monitoring, the guards were able to stop him, and then moved him from a solitary to a shared cell where other inmates could keep

an eye on him. Unintentionally, I overheard what he said to the guards in the corridor, just outside our cell. One of the guards was trying to calm him down as the man kept shouting, “You don’t understand! I can’t take this anymore!” and told the guard that he had been subjected to one of the cruelest forms of torture in the place, by having an electrode shoved up his anus. Unable to grasp that such things were routine in Isolation, the man earnestly wanted to explain to the guard what had been done to him—something he himself could not quite believe.

Another serious case involved a man who had been tortured together with his own son, on the same table. Torture is a complex system of measures and isn’t limited to causing physical pain. When the man’s son lost control of his bladder—reflexively, because of the muscle spasms induced by the electricity shocking his genitals and anus (they did the same to the father)—the men doing the torturing yelled at the father, “Look at your brat—he peed himself!” This inmate later told me that neither the torture itself nor the threat to his life had caused him as much pain as he felt in that moment. But it would be quite some time before we would talk. On the day he was brought to our cell, we just saw a fellow inmate with deep electrical burns and blood bruises on his head. The latter were the result of his suicide attempt: he had tried to kill himself by smashing his skull against the metal frame of the cot in his solitary cell. His transfer to our cell meant that the administration was done “working” on him and now saw its task as keeping the man alive.

That evening we encountered another problem. From about 7 p.m. until half past 8 p.m., the man was suddenly completely disoriented. He raved as if in a fever and clearly didn't know where he was. It turned out that he had been tortured every day for a week at precisely that time. At night, whenever he heard the slightest noise in the corridor, his hands would begin to shake and he'd sit perched on the very edge of the cot nearest the door, saying over and over, "Just hang on, son, hang on, hang on." He was convinced that he was back in the basement with his son and didn't respond to anything we said to him. We had to lift him up and move him to a seat at the table (which involved pressing on his broken ribs), where we could begin to engage him in a conversation about fishing and mining (he was a miner and liked to fish).

In the end, the administration let his son go, warning the father that they could always bring the young man back if things didn't go as planned at the father's trial. When his son was released, I remember thinking that being freed like that was, in a way, worse than staying inside. One day you're enjoying your life, expecting a baby with your beloved wife, and the next day you're naked in a basement, strapped to a table alongside your father, and men are pouring water on you and electrocuting you. Then, a month later, you're back on the outside because someone decided they don't actually need you. Is life not absurd?

It took me nearly two years—two years of life in the Isolation facility—to arrive at what I consider the most fundamental conclusion I could reach about what went

on there. To make a reasoned, conscious choice in favor of life when everything makes death a much more rational option—that’s the answer. That’s the answer to the search for meaning and forgiveness, and, if it can be put in these terms, the key to the essence of one’s self. Personally, I must admit that I intuitively know this to be true, as opposed to being able to articulate why this is so, but in any case, I’m not talking about a sudden-onset lust for life or anything like that. To love life in a place where men scream from torture or bark under cots would be blasphemous. Reality insists that suicide is the rational choice. But the thing is that Isolation isn’t a fact of war; it’s a fact of human nature.

Let me explain. You would be wrong to assume that the abuse there was limited only to us, the Ukrops, whom they considered to be everyone charged with espionage. On the contrary, we were treated with a certain care, with an eventual prisoner swap in mind, which meant that we had to be kept free of visible scars, burns, or fractures. The locals, meanwhile—the so-called rebel militia, former employees of the “Security Ministry,” etc. — were cannon fodder, lab rats that could be beaten into a pulp without fear of consequences. The Isolation’s administration knew perfectly well that no Russian TV crew would ever come interview them and no local paper would ever run a story about them. These people did not exist; their suffering did not exist; they were no one. That’s why Isolation represents the line that, once crossed, makes a man feel like a god, while acting like the devil himself. Isolation is the story of each one of us, and especially of those

who had survived it and were ready to inflict violence on those who had done the same to them.

I talked to many prisoners, and most of them were unanimous about this one thing: given a chance to exact revenge, they wouldn't hesitate for a second. You've seen your own reflection in the masked faces of the people torturing you, and you know that, in the moment of pain or when they're laughing, you are capable of even greater cruelty towards *them*. If Isolation's administration could read our thoughts, I doubt we would have been permitted to walk as far as the showers without handcuffs. On the other hand, none of us got much beyond the idea of revenge, and, while people did engage in self-harm, not a single individual attacked the guards. This presents a separate question: why was it so? In the worst times, Isolation held upward of seventy prisoners, and yet there wasn't a single incident of mass disobedience.

Going back to the problem of suicide, it must also be conceded that, given a chance to catch your breath and recover from the initial shock, you discover a whole chain of very practical considerations that stand between you and your death—and these do keep you grounded. There's your education and religious beliefs, your bonds of affection, and the fear of death, as well as a certain egoism. Many inmates said they weren't ready to kill themselves precisely because doing so would invalidate everything they had already endured. In such a way, every new day of torture and abuse became a reason to endure the next one. A cellmate of mine, who had been kept handcuffed to bars in the basement for a month (he had to grab

everything, even the bottle of putrid water he was given, with his feet), put it like this: “I’m not ready to give up my life so cheaply. Dying at the front, in combat, like a warrior—sure. But croaking here like a sick dog, on a cot, so that they can write ‘heart failure’ as the cause of death on my death certificate—I’m not doing that.”

This was also the man that, on principle, always wore the hood in which he’d been tortured and, whenever he was summoned to the Office, wore this hood with shreds of duct tape that those torturing him used to restrain him as they attached their wires. When I asked him about it, he joked that he liked it as a souvenir. I can only add that many prisoners had only one item on their list of reasons to remain alive, and that was revenge.

I’m convinced that there are two sides to suicide, a psychological and an ontological one, and they cannot replace each other. I’d like to elaborate on this because, in the circumstances of wartime capture, a mere neural connection without conscious thought is simply not possible. The reverse is also true: a person who’s spent a long time roaming the labyrinth of depression and despair sooner or later finds that they must justify their choice on ontological, philosophical grounds and none other. Let me illustrate this with my personal experience.

In some way or another, I considered suicide regularly, from my days in the basement of the Office to my stay in the normal prison. But I was never closer to carrying it out than after I had survived Isolation and was transferred to the Donetsk Central Jail.

This prison was managed by a different agency, not the so-called Internal Security, and yet anything family sent to us “political” prisoners was screened by a security agent detailed to the Central Jail to keep an eye on us. Once, during the single visit we were allowed, I asked my mother to bring or send me a Russian-English dictionary: for whatever reason, my own copy had been confiscated in Isolation along with my notes. When the dictionary arrived and I was leafing through it, I noticed that some words were underlined. Naturally, any written communication like notes or letters for “the political” was forbidden here just as it had been in Isolation, so my first instinct was that my mother might have been trying to convey some important news to me. Moreover, the words were chosen from the Russian section of the dictionary, highlighted in the same color, and, as it turned out, carried a shared meaning that ruled out an accident. But as soon as I read them, things went dark before my eyes, my pulse spiked, and my face turned as white as the wall, which alarmed my cellmates.

These are the words that were highlighted: “pregnant,” “rape,” “prostitute,” “debauchery,” “bitch,” and “thing.” Despite the fact that I knew perfectly well my mother could never use such words to refer to the woman who at the time was still the focal point of my life, and despite some choices being downright odd (“prostitute” and “rape”), I lost my ability to think for a week. Jumping ahead, I can tell you that my mother had, in fact, sent me a clean copy of the dictionary and the highlighting was the handiwork of the Special Services, whose men had singled me out as their

next source of entertainment. But imagine what it was like in the moment: there I am, locked up in a small cell without a reasonable expectation of being released or communicating with the outside world (while the criminals next door to us had smuggled in cell phones, we “politicals” couldn’t get one for any amount of money). And here comes this set of words that communicates to me with a few highlights that the focal point of my life and of all the suffering I had endured had been destroyed. It was impossible to understand what exactly had happened, but it was clear that it’s something terrible, and I had no way of doing anything about it or even learning the details.

I came close to losing my mind. Even now, when I recall the first twenty-four hours after I read those words, I still feel a trace of the nausea that lasted the entire ensuing week, along with fever, uncontrollable trembling, and a nearly complete inability to sleep. In a moment like that, you feel each square foot of space around you acutely as you realize that your entire capacity for action is being reduced to the radius of three or four steps. I was astonished to recall my euphoria upon first arriving from Isolation in this cell of the Central Jail. Now, it physically hurt me, ruining my mind and self with a mere set of words. I don’t know how I managed to survive that week before a cellmate, risking his own visitation privileges, managed to get me a message from my mother: “I didn’t highlight anything. She’s still waiting for you.”

For a person in deep depression, the entire world collapses into a small dot. The loss of existential guideposts—the existential shock—produces an utter repression

of the will to act. You can summon just barely enough will to do one thing: kill yourself. Rationally speaking, avoiding pain is a natural instinct, and that's precisely what the person contemplating suicide tells themselves they're doing: putting an end to the unendurable. Such a person appears apathetic, indifferent, taciturn—until they conclude that they have neither the willpower nor the reason to keep tolerating the torment their internal life has become.

And herein lies the danger of the suicide ontology: a prisoner of Isolation facing boundless cruelty has only this idea of escape to hold on to and is absolutely honest with themselves when they all but say out loud, "I don't want to die, but, if my suffering becomes unendurable, I will be forced to kill myself."

Everything is different on the outside. The prisoner is no longer under threat. But the kaleidoscope of disappointments is so overwhelming that a freed person is plunged into another shock when they find no answers to their questions. More on this later.

TORTURE: A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

I must begin by reiterating that torture is a complex system of measures, whose goal is not so much to break a person physically as to destroy them as an individual. This is why intimidation—which makes physical pain more acute—and humiliation are so important. What I am about to write does not aspire to be a comprehensive catalog of torture methods practiced in various penal basements around Donetsk. My goal is merely to convey my personal experience with the “treatments” (a favorite euphemism among prison guards) that I underwent.

My own “treatments” took place not at the Isolation facility, but a good six weeks before I got there, in well-lit commonplace office rooms in downtown Donetsk, in the middle of the day. I was astonished when I was first brought handcuffed into a room like that and made to sit on a chair next to a window that opened onto one of Donetsk’s main boulevards. A few minutes later, men would attach electrical wires to my thumbs and send

a charge through them, but the rest of the day would remain just as ordinary. There would be no darkness in it, no terrifying basement cells like those where my future fellow inmates would be tortured. I would still see the trees outside (they even took the hood off my head), the bright May sun that shone just as gently, and—a bit further off—people at the bus stop who were waiting for their buses while my body spasmed and contorted. The absurdity of all of this being squeezed into one small fragment of the city would astonish me many times over. To begin with, however, I was brought into the Office to face the mildest tool known to the locals: the PR-73, a standard Soviet-police rubber baton.

For a while they hit me with it on the same spot, right above the knee. It only took a few minutes for my skin to swell into a soap bubble inside my jeans. In Isolation, they called people who underwent this type of torture “stoplights” because their entire bodies became a single purple bruise, which later turned yellow and finally greenish. I remember the guards once returning a man to the cell next door and just placing him on the floor. They covered him with a blanket and forbade anyone from trying to move him. He lay there until morning.

I did not reach the full stoplight status, like that man, but, while they were beating me, my interrogators expected me to answer their questions, which amounted to a general inquiry as to what sort of scum, or “animal” (*tvar*), I was that I didn’t respect the people’s choice to live in a separate country. If I hesitated for even an instant, or tried to say that I couldn’t focus because of the

pain, they beat me harder and with greater frequency, so I began to get my taste of the absurd. I had to keep up my end of the conversation, while pretending that I wasn't being worked over with the baton.

After a brief interaction along these lines, they pulled the hood back over my head and took me to a room next door, where they took it off. That's where everything happened. In front of me, I saw three men wearing balaclavas and a small video camera. Very politely, using exclusively the formal "you" when addressing me, they asked me to recite my biography for the camera. The formal address and the politeness gave me the illusion that things might not be as bad as I had thought. In that moment, I had no inkling yet of the scale of the underground torture operation in Donetsk, or of the fact that ninety-nine men out of a hundred were tortured in that very building. I started realizing these things as soon as the men in balaclavas shut off the video camera and someone brought in an old-fashioned phone. The phone was a local celebrity, referred to as a "portable polygraph"—a military-issue field phone with an inductor. A pair of wires came out of the machine, which were promptly wrapped around my thumbs.

Contrary to what I had come to anticipate, the first electrical shock followed an apparently innocent question about a specific number stored in my cellphone. I could feel the onset of physical shock from the beating, but I still had enough mental acuity to recognize the number as belonging to my bank. "I don't know," I said. "I've never called it." That was the wrong answer—and electric

current surged through me. Any negative answer would produce another jolt: I deduced this from the next set of the apparently absurd questions I was asked.

For example, they next asked me how often I masturbated. Their trick is to begin with questions that are uncomfortable for you but have answers that are obvious to the interrogator. If you begin to lie already in this phase, the torture will become more prolonged and crueler. On top of this, they try to disorient you by intermixing questions about, in my case, the espionage with which I had been charged, and whether I believed in god or had ever jumped with a parachute. This evident chaos has one specific goal: to make you lie.

When asked about the parachute jump, I replied, "Yes" and was immediately asked to name the type of parachute I had used. I said, "Ram-air," and was instantly electrocuted and hit on the back of my head with a hard object, while the interrogator shouted, "Liar!" Clearly, these people had no way of knowing the actual facts of my parachuting experience (nor did they care about them). What they wanted was to make me change my answer so that they could say I was lying and go on torturing me.

Questions about my family or whether I believed in god created the illusion of a respite, a "human conversation," which made the electric shock that followed all the more painful. And remember, throughout this interaction the mildest form of address used toward the subject is "scum," which is also intended to lower their self-esteem and engender a sense of being culpable. Then, when the conversation turned to god, one of them

addressed me with the formal “you,” before shocking me again—a roller-coaster ride engineered straight out of a Soviet-era handbook.

Of course, you come to assess all of this later, once the torture is over, but there were details that I grasped that very day. For instance, as soon as they had me sit down, one of them said brusquely, “Why should we even mess with him? Cut off his fucking head and drop him in the river!” And yet I saw that they were all wearing balaclavas—and why would you hide your face if you were really about to cut off someone’s head? Another thing: they kept asking me about a liaison, a messenger—who, of course, didn’t exist. That’s when I realized that I mustn’t, under any circumstances, make anything up. Yes, every time you say “No” they dial up the electricity, but it’s better to bear the increasing shocks than to get mired in a tangle of fictions, which in the long run would hurt you much more. Later, at the pretrial detention facility, I met a guy who, just like me, had found himself on a chair, with wires attached to his feet, being asked about his non-existent work for the Secret Services. He couldn’t stand it and made up a major that was “running” him, even giving this major a name—and suffered, ultimately, harder and longer before his torturers realized that he had been telling them fiction.

At some point my interrogators told me to quit screaming and promised to cut off my nose if I continued. They followed this up by hitting the bridge of my nose with a hatchet, which turned out to be dull. By then there was a wire connected to my ear, so I had to answer

questions while losing control of my facial muscles. This, of course, made me slur my words, which prompted one of the interrogators to increase the voltage. I got shocked, among other things, for having written a novel that included an episode about my trip to visit the French Foreign Legion. These men were convinced that I had been recruited back then and, what's more, only joined because I had "wanted to kill people." I was feeling pretty indifferent to the whole business right then, as I was barely upright and only intermittently conscious, when they shocked me again.


To finish up, they told me that they would take me to a cell where people would "lower" me that very night—that is, rape me. If I wanted to have the safety of a solitary cell, they said, I should sign everything they placed before me. The threat, as it later turned out, was not just posturing: in Isolation, sexual assault was widely used, against both men and women. The administration kept specific inmates to "do the job" and afterward hid them in separate cells to protect them from the rest of the prison population.

In the end, that night I did land in a solitary cell in the basement, where I spent the next six weeks before being transferred to the place that made me beg to go back to that basement cell.

WHAT BROKE ME

I've mentioned before that the goal of those who engage in torture is not so much to cause you physical pain as it is to break you as an individual, to destroy your independent will. This, of course, doesn't apply to torture for the sake of torture—namely, pure sadism, which occurred fairly often at the Isolation facility and, more generally, was routine behavior for the local Security Services. But, looking back at my time in captivity, I can confidently identify only one time when I resigned myself utterly and completely. It only took ten seconds to break me.

I was still being held in the solitary cell in the basement of the Office, before being transferred to Isolation, when one day I was brought out and driven beyond the city limits for the purposes of so-called “investigative measures.” As fate would have it, we drove past my old neighborhood; meanwhile, my hood had been pulled off as we drove out of the city.



Building no. 2 with the torture room in the basement, canteen, and ammo storage

Building no. 3: detention facility

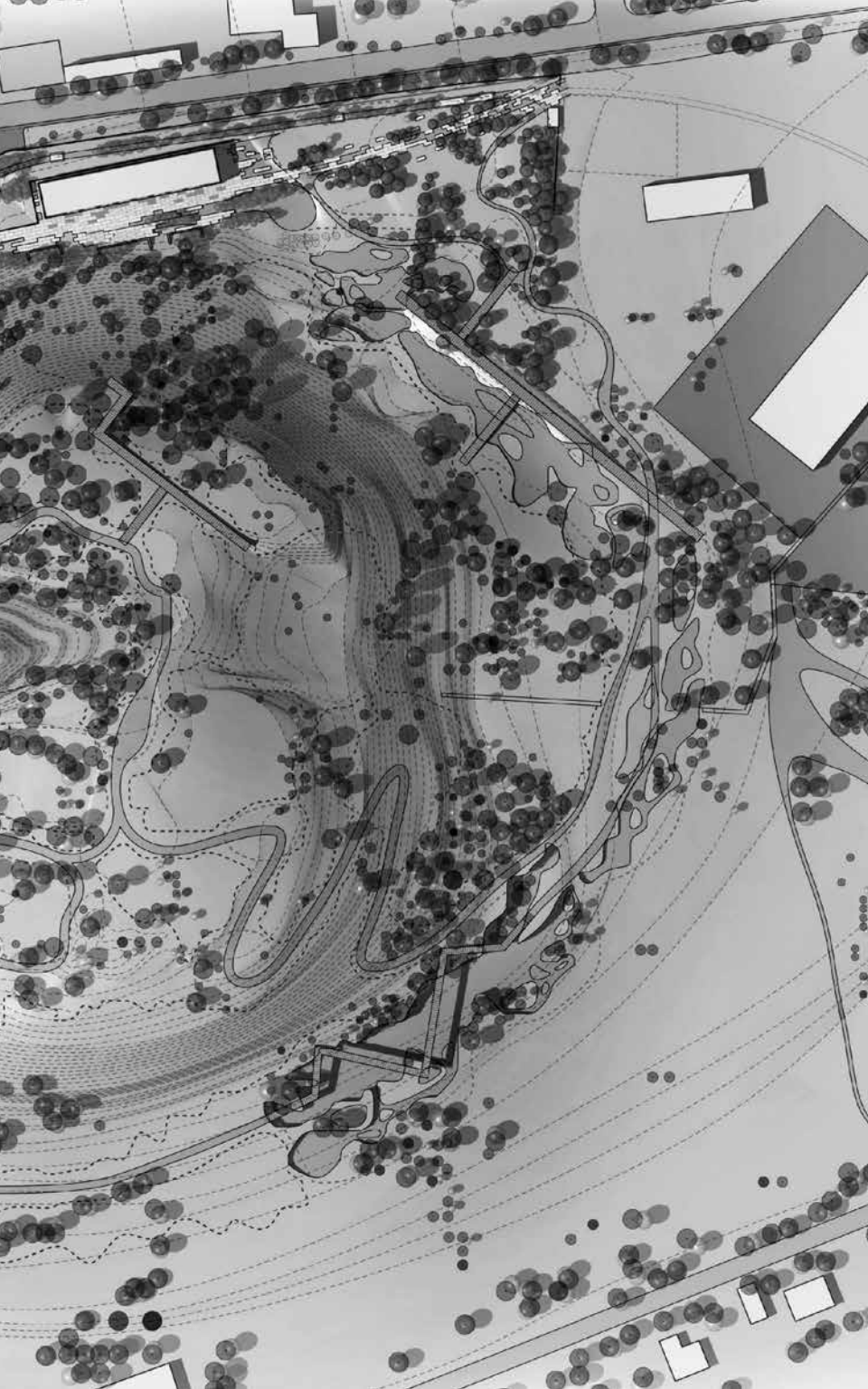
Shooting gallery

Gate 2

Depot with tanks, armored personnel vehicles, trucks, and anti-aircraft weapons

Slag heap

"Plantations"
(forced labor site)



I confess, I have hated Makiivka—the town where I grew up, about ten miles outside of Donetsk—my entire life. Makiivka is a city of Soviet sleepwalkers. It always made me think of Stephen King's *The Langoliers*: the place had no taste or smell, and time had stopped there. There was no future in Makiivka.

And yet here I was, being driven past my own neighborhood, handcuffed. I could see the familiar buildings—the apartment block where I lived was right behind them. I had been in the basement for more than a month by then and knew that my mother had gone to the “Ministry of Security” to inquire about my imprisonment. Naturally, she was told that they had no knowledge of my whereabouts. I looked out the van window and pictured my mother, in a room by herself, by the phone. She had just made a call to another morgue. Or perhaps she was crying, plagued by uncertainty, not knowing if her son was even alive.

I looked at the road and realized that I would never see all this again: the corners, the trees—every foot of it I knew so intimately. It was right here that I, a romantic boy, had dreamed of France and the Foreign Legion, and put myself through years of running on this cracked pavement in order to train for that future. I could count every crack in the asphalt in my sleep. This very field here was my small temple, where I escaped at nights from the dusty city to plot the brilliant novel I would one day write. And that was the bus stop where my friends and I used to hang out: we couldn't fathom then that, ten years later, tanks would roll down this street to Donetsk as I was

being transported in an unmarked car past them to a penal basement.

I saw all those things and knew that I could cover the distance that separated me from my mother in three or four minutes. Then I could hug her. But I was being taken back to the basement: the vision flitted by and was gone, like a dream. I could feel the cold pressure of the handcuffs again, hear the laughter, and see the grins around me—while the distance between me and my mother grew to months, then years. Those ten seconds broke me. Neither being held prisoner nor the torture had such a devastating effect on me. Those people who were so insistent on humiliating me and worked so hard to shatter my personality into little pieces had no clue that they could have gotten me to do anything right there and then; I would have signed any confession they put before me. All I wanted was to be shot—such was the depth of my despair.

SEX IN ISOLATION

“Wash between your legs!” was the order that usually signaled one of the inmates from the women’s cell next door was to be taken upstairs to the second floor. For women, the second floor meant rape. That’s where the Boss lived, and that’s where the women were taken after being ordered to clean themselves thoroughly.

The topic of sexual relations in incarceration deserves special attention. After the initial shock of being locked up, one’s sexual drives do reassert themselves eventually. This area, just like other things, is subject to the Code, which maintains that one inmate cannot force another into any kind of sexual encounter against his or her will. The rule applies to all castes of the inside world, regardless of your own position in the hierarchy. Someone who uses force against—that is, rapes—a fellow inmate, even one of the “lowered” ones, risks being demoted to one of the lowest castes himself. In the prison world, the crime bosses’ command “not to punish with your dick”

has been in place for a long time, which means that the consequences of the most egregious trespasses, such as those that involve a “lowering,” must never include rape.

In traditional labor camps or prisons, things almost never devolve to such extremes. The system is managed in such a way that for a pack of cigarettes (or whatever the local going rate happens to be) you can obtain almost any sexual service desired from inmates that make a living off this and don’t fear sliding down lower in the hierarchy. Guys from “sealers” with whom I used to share a cell in Isolation told me that sex wasn’t a problem for people serving even twenty-year sentences.

An interesting quirk of prison culture is that there’s no opprobrium attached to having sex with another man as a top. In fact, sex between men is considered to be homosexual only for the bottom. This made it particularly odd to listen to the men whenever the conversation touched on European politics: they were utterly terrified of gay pride parades or same-sex marriages, while in the same breath denying that their own sexual practices were in any way similar. Of course, prison culture is a far cry from a society’s views of sex. According to these same people, there was even a period of deliberation at the very top of the criminal hierarchy as to how to view ex-cons that continued to have sex with men on the outside because they no longer felt any attraction to women.

What went on at the Isolation facility plunged even these veterans of the correctional system into terror. The Boss was obsessed with sex and engaged in it with the same perversion he exercised in other activities, which

resulted in dozens of broken lives. His obsession was evident both in his behavior and his speech, which consisted predominantly of gendered profanity. It was typical of him to open the door to a shower stall while two inmates were inside and yell for the whole jail to hear that they were gay and having sex—in the obscenest terms, of course, and with dramatic intonation, appropriate to the humor he perceived inherent in the situation. Women suffered similar intrusions, except with them he added offers of his assistance in bathing, or oral sex—also loudly enough for the entire floor to hear.

Life in Isolation was organized to reflect, with many distortions, the traditional Code, and thus included a certain number of “roosters,” or “lowered” inmates. However, the demotion to this lowest of prison castes was done entirely according to Palych’s discretion and most certainly involved a penis, with which he could order someone to touch the lips or the face of an already “lowered” inmate. Things that, in a regular prison, would be far beyond the pale even for the prison administration were made into a norm in Isolation—a norm that, with time, became subject to irony. The Boss once forced two “lowered” inmates to kiss in public while he happily talked about the kind of life they could expect for the rest of their sentences.

Still, men experienced sexual humiliation and violence far less frequently than women. There were no games to be played about “lowering” this or that female inmate: Palych simply chose his victim for the night and ordered the guards to “prep” her before lights out. On top of that, it wasn’t easy to tell when he was merely

threatening a new inmate and when he actually intended for her to be taken upstairs. Let me give you an example.

One of the downsides of living in cells number four or number two in Isolation was that they shared walls with a women's cell, number three. If the tray slot was as much as cracked open, you could see and hear the guards harass the women. This often also involved Palych himself, who had no qualms about showering women with his choicest obscenities while a tray slot next door was completely open. He particularly delighted in focusing his tirades on female genitals and yet, the next instant, could address a female inmate with the formal "you," which couldn't fail to shock the addressee yet again, which he obviously also enjoyed. There is no doubt that he deployed this verbal seesaw deliberately, and its effect was evident in the women's reactions: they cried at first, but eventually would begin to speak to him with the same tone of voice as when addressing a father figure. Of course, it's possible that the women were only pretending to submit in a simple effort to adapt to their circumstances and avoid another beating in the middle of the night. Nonetheless, a particular episode gives me reason to doubt that.

One night a new inmate, a young woman, was brought in. From our number four we could clearly hear her moaning (likely after "treatments" she had been subjected to that very night) while she was being escorted into number six, another women's cell. It was Palych himself who escorted her, cursing at her in the most merciless terms and promising that the next day she would be raped (to put it mildly). It's difficult to fathom what this experience must be

like for an average local woman, whose concerns the preceding day had likely revolved around grocery prices and children's clothes, and who had now endured torture and was being threatened with sexual assault.

The following morning, however, I heard Palych just as clearly when he stopped by number six and calmly asked, "How can I help you?" From snippets of the conversation, I gathered that the new woman was suffering from some kind of inflammation, likely pertaining to the reproductive system (which may well have been the result of torture), and I heard Palych tell her that the prison didn't have a gynecologist on staff. Technically, he wasn't lying. There were no doctors at all, except the sadistic individual that did physical exams after participating in the torture of the same inmate the night before. He watered his own garden, so to speak. But the way the Boss spoke to that woman changed radically in that moment and, shockingly, the young woman trustingly looked up to him in her meek response: after all, this psychopath was the only person who was showing any concern for her, never mind that a few hours earlier he had promised that he would "let the boys have her." That's how Palych would endear himself to women—namely, by bringing about and carefully cultivating Stockholm syndrome.

Women who were brought in along with their husbands or boyfriends had it even worse. Palych didn't hesitate to blackmail them with their partner's health and safety, and often placed couples next door to one another to maximize their psychological torment. All this always produced the results he wanted.

After the Boss was removed and himself sent to the basement, the situation changed drastically. Whether or not this should have been expected, the average age of the female population dropped rapidly and the number of young female inmates grew. The three women's cells filled to capacity, and more women were kept in the basement—usually the newest arrivals, who were still being interrogated. Management then appeared to divide the women up among themselves. Previously it had been common to hear, if you were in the cell next to the Monitoring Room, someone shouting to a male prisoner, “Let’s see how you do on top of a dick!” Now, however, the women seemed willing to provide sexual services to the masters of the prison.

It’s impossible to judge these women, and not just because none of us could truly appreciate what they went through. Isolation was a place that erased all boundaries and commonly held principles, but it reached a new level of absurdity when the guards on duty started to drive their favorites to a sauna on Sundays. Given the age of these women and their physical attractiveness, it’s likely that, if they hadn’t engaged in sex with the employees of the facility, they would have been raped. Possibly. In this sense, age was a saving grace: the older a woman was, the greater were her chances of avoiding sexual violence and “simply” being beaten severely.

But there are other reasons why we cannot judge women who agreed to pleasure the prison staff. I remember my cellmate telling me about a young woman he had just run into in the hallway. He was being escorted

back to our cell, and she was coming downstairs, wearing pajamas and carrying a toothbrush and toothpaste. As soon as she saw him and his escort, she hid around the corner—and he, of course, had to share the incident as soon as he made it into our cell. I remember well that the story prompted neither anger nor any kind of judgment from me: all I wanted to do was scream, but I couldn't even manage that. What I felt was not an urge to make physical noise, but an acute need to feel something—anything—about this madhouse that was about to do me in. I had spent two years witnessing people being beaten, raped, and tortured; made to fight one another so the guards could wager; made to bark like dogs; humiliated; and electrocuted. Now, it seemed, we also had a brothel. I felt as if I were standing at a crossroads, except that, instead of two or three paths to choose from, I was facing a million options of how to emotionally react. I knew that some of these women already had families. But after everything that we had witnessed in Isolation, I simply couldn't judge another human being.

Of course, there were those who told me that they hated those women more than they hated the administration. "Don't you see," a cellmate of mine asked, "that, when those women jump into bed with them, they invalidate all the suffering people go through here? All those broken lives? It's like a reality TV show for them or something: tomorrow the boys take me to the sauna, on Thursday I sleep upstairs, on Wednesday they'll fuck me in the kitchen, and that's how I'll make it through my time. It's insane, Stas, patently insane. That's why I always say,

I'd happily give up my life if theirs could be taken along, too. I don't care if we're ground into dirt and buried, but this place must not exist."

To be fair, to be a woman in Isolation was not the same as to be a man. You might smile at the obviousness of this statement, but consider living for months in number six, which had no toilet, and using a trash can to relieve yourself while being watched around the clock. And I won't even mention the basements and the Cooler, which for women were much harder to endure than for men. Anything concerning sex always began with "soft power": a young woman who didn't get the hints would be transferred to number six, where, in addition to the lack of facilities, she could be made to stand for hours by the window, with her back to the door, struggling to breathe inside her hood, allegedly as a punishment for some infraction. At the same time, she would be given to understand that the "good girls'" cell had a TV, a bathroom, and even an air conditioning unit. On top of that, the "good girls" had the unimpeded run of the entire territory, could access the kitchen, and ate incomparably better. They were taken on joy rides on armored personnel carriers and spent time outdoors washing these same vehicles. In a word, they didn't complicate things for themselves or others. It was at this point—when Isolation turned into a brothel—that I was transferred to the Donetsk Central Jail, which was one of the happiest events in those two years of my life.

To return to the general question of sexual needs, most often inmates responded by masturbating. It's hard to imagine a healthy male that could spend two to three

CHAPTER 11. SEX IN ISOLATION

years without pleasuring himself sexually, even in a place like Isolation. On the contrary, in more than a few cases, the shock that an inmate endured could morph into an increased libido, whose mechanics I need not describe.

THE ESCAPE

I doubt you could find a single prisoner who hasn't considered an escape plan. Personally, I thought of escaping even while I was being held in the basement of the Office, where my chances of escape were nonexistent. Still, I couldn't have imagined that I would eventually become an accomplice in someone else's escape attempt, yet would myself remain in jail. The person in question is the same Russian man I met even before Isolation, in the basement of the Office: he had been there for eight months, living in the cell next to the one they would throw me in. The man, whose name was Denis, came to Donbas as a professional service member of the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR), deployed to defend *ruskii mir*. Later, men he used to command would torture him cruelly and the FSB would deposit him in the basement—without a charge, a trial, or an investigation. They would simply forget he existed. I won't bore the reader with the long detective story of how this came to

be. The upshot is that, a year after we met in Isolation, Denis said, "I'm going to escape." And so it began.

Once he had spoken to me, I could no longer step aside or say, "I'll have no part of it." I couldn't escape along with him: I was the only prisoner at the Isolation facility that was never taken out of his cell to work outdoors. An escape from the cell itself was inconceivable. But neither could I avoid getting involved: if Denis attempted to escape and failed, it would only be a matter of time before he told his captors I was aware of his plan. No one stays silent in these basements. People implicate themselves in things they could not even have imagined an hour earlier. I knew one person who, under torture, falsely testified against someone he'd never met. And if the failed escapee happened to be a Russian with knowledge of things that had made the FSB bury him here for the second year running—well, they would just turn him inside out. So, I had a personal stake in making sure Denis succeeded. Plus, he intended to defect to the Ukrainian side and, before he left, he told me practically everything there was to know about his case and the Russians who employed him during the war.

That doesn't mean that I accepted the prospect easily. You have to remember that an inmate in Isolation lives in constant stress because he expects physical violence at any moment, on top of being completely uncertain about his ultimate fate and worrying about his family. Adding the idea of an escape into the mix was mentally exhausting—and not just for me. Denis, who was usually sociable and upbeat, spent more and more time in inward

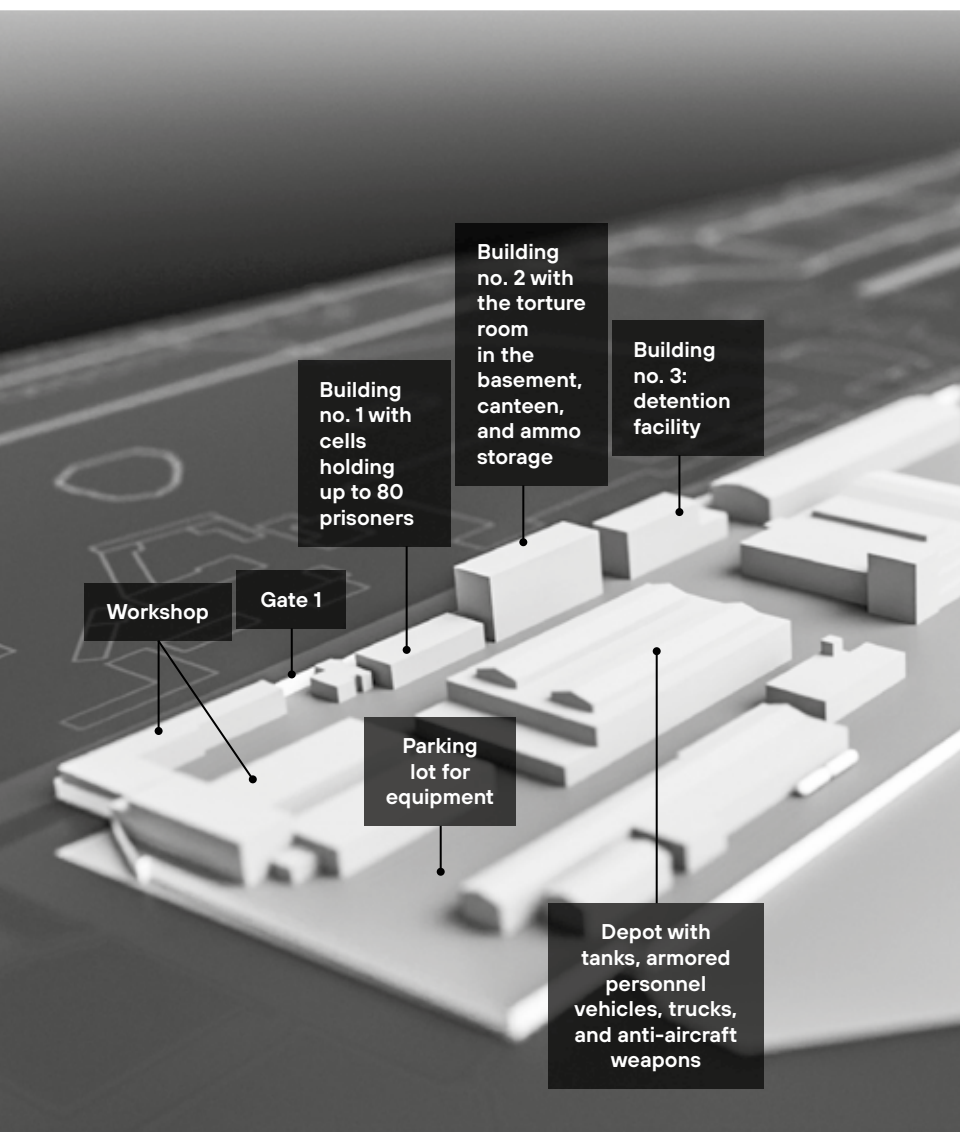
silence, and I started to worry that someone might notice the change in him.

Not only do you have to plan every small detail of what you intend to do, but, inevitably, you start thinking about failing and what could happen then. I tried to imagine what I would say when I was interrogated, what questions they would ask me. All these thoughts, added to Isolation's regular pressures, pushed me to a precarious mental point: eventually, I began dreaming of when it would all be over.

After I realized that I couldn't get out of Denis's plan and that it was too late to plug my ears and pretend I had heard nothing, I spent the next twenty-four hours speaking to him exclusively in obscene terms because I couldn't believe he had put me into that position. He knew perfectly well that I couldn't go with him and that I wouldn't be able to turn him in. So, he left me no choice, and wanted me to assess his plan with a "fresh perspective" and give him a contact on the Ukrainian side, so that the Ukrainian Special Services would know who he was.

Of course, I listened to what he had come up with. He didn't really have a plan as such.

Besides the fact that the FSB had taken his passport to Russia and he had no money, Denis hadn't thought of the most basic contingencies. What if the people he planned to reach had died, had moved, or called the police? Where would he hide before he got to them? Where was he going to get new clothes to change into, in case they tracked him with dogs? And finally, how was I to convince myself that I knew nothing of his plan so that



Workshop

Gate 1

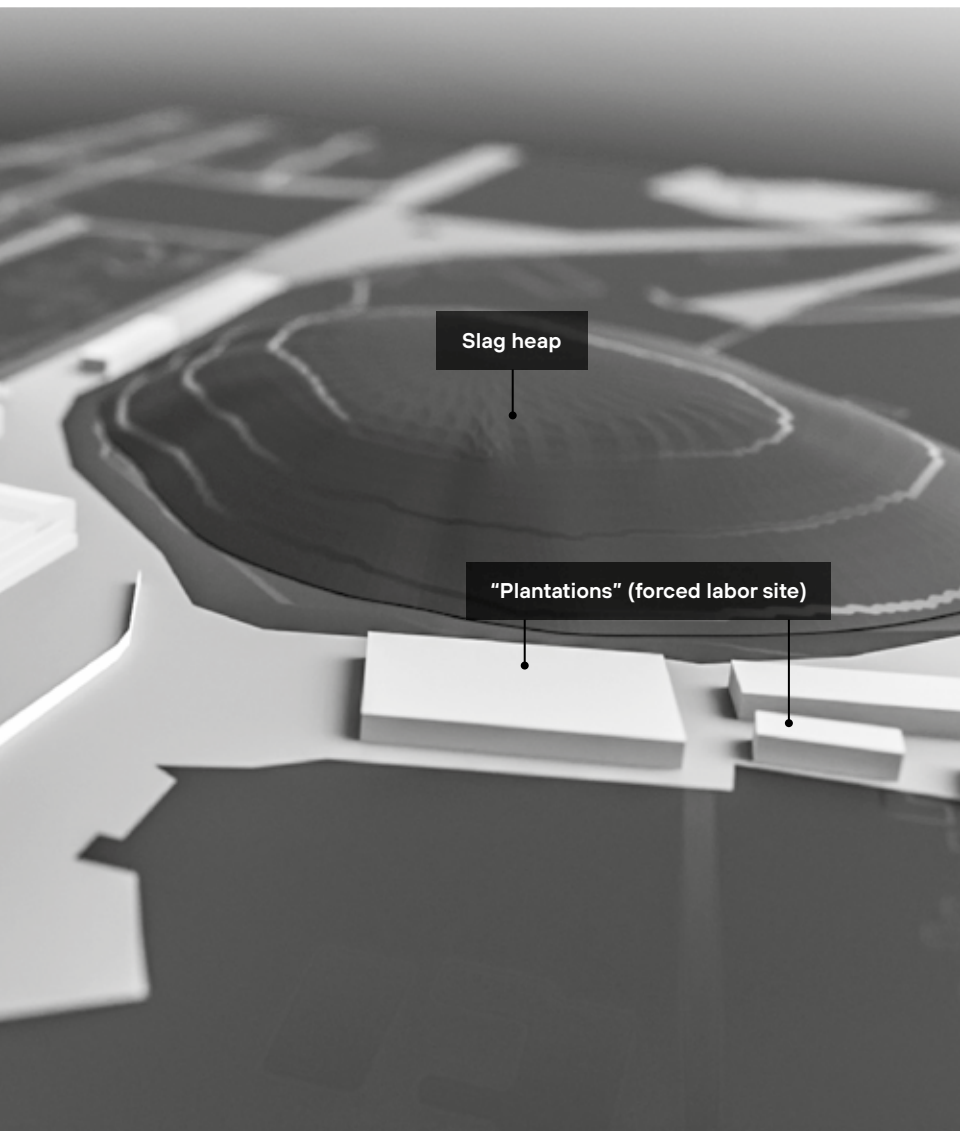
Building
no. 1 with
cells
holding
up to 80
prisoners

Building
no. 2 with
the torture
room
in the
basement,
canteen,
and ammo
storage

Building
no. 3:
detention
facility

Parking
lot for
equipment

Depot with
tanks, armored
personnel
vehicles, trucks,
and anti-aircraft
weapons



I could pass an interrogation with a polygraph? This last question worried me the most because I knew our entire cell would be questioned very thoroughly after the escape, and when other folks would be asked who had the closest relationship with Denis, they would all point at me. And if somehow it was discovered that I had been privy to his plans... well, there were many options of what they'd do to me, and they all involved electrical wires.

We decided to deal with the money problem first. Amazingly, this was also the easiest problem to solve. Over the years that the cell had been in use, lost coins had accumulated in between the cots' boards—one- and two-ruble coins, and sometimes even a fiver. Altogether, we found about sixty rubles' worth—enough to get from Donetsk to any nearby town.

After this, I had Denis memorize the last names of three people he could contact one after another, and told him exactly what to say to them. All three were civilians I had known for years, and with each one I had shared an experience only the two of us knew about. I told Denis about each incident so that he would be believed if he succeeded in getting out of Isolation.

The question of clothes went unaddressed: Denis didn't believe he would be tracked with a dog. He was wrong. As soon as his escape was noticed, the entire guard shift flew into our room and swept up everything that he had touched. They gave his things to a tracking dog to smell, and the dog picked up the scent. The guards were able to follow Denis's trail all the way to the military college, where he boarded a local bus with the money we had found.

Nor did he listen to me when I asked him to stage a fight in our cell so that he would be transferred. "Move to another cell, wait a couple of weeks, then run as far as you want. That'll protect me," I told him. But he thought that the idea was too complicated and theatrical, and was concerned, quite rationally, that, if he instigated a fight, he would land in solitary in the Cooler, not in a cell next door.

The only thing Denis did work out in great detail was his actual plan of how to escape from the facility's vast industrial area, where prisoners were taken to work. He told me that he had decided to run as soon as he and I were transferred to Isolation from the basement of the Office, and it was to this end that he had spent the preceding year pretending to be an ardent Russian patriot so that he would be included in the outdoors work detail and trusted by the administration. For the last few months before his escape, all he did was count steps and seconds from different points in the work yard to the unguarded exit from the former factory's territory into a neighborhood of private cottages. There was one main gate to the Isolation facility, and the rest of the perimeter was either fenced or simply abutted private land. The facility had such a gruesome reputation that it would never have occurred to an ordinary citizen to venture into its territory, and the administration didn't bother with closing up the gaps in the fence.

In the course of planning Denis's escape, I learned one detail that unsettled me. I remember that we were discussing how to choose the guard shift on whose watch he would run. The staff included all kinds of people, and

there were men with military and special services experience acquired before the war. On the other hand, there were also folks who had just taken a job at Isolation to make a living, becoming guards after working construction, for example. Clearly, it would be better to attempt the escape when the less vigilant shift was on duty. And that's where Denis disagreed: he said he didn't want to "fuck them over."

It took me a moment to realize what he was saying. In my heart, I think, I could sense what was coming, but still, I didn't want to believe what was happening. The "softest" shift, you see, treated the inmates in terms that, in contrast to the practices of the glib abusers, were downright humane, and Denis had developed a classic case of Stockholm syndrome. He felt affection for these people because they had treated him "decently," and now believed that his escape would betray them. Aside from the fact that the "decent" treatment amounted to *not* engaging in routine verbal and physical abuse, and addressing Denis by his name—which, admittedly, was a rarity in Isolation—expressing any kind of gratitude to these people was absurd. I felt that I had to get this through to him right then and there, as directly as possible. I had to shake him out of his shock-induced thinking. I remember saying something along these lines to him:

Denis, you came to my country to defend *russ-kii mir*. No one forced you: you came of your own volition because you believed in it. And what did you get in return? Your own men

tortured you, pulled a hood over your head, and doused you with water while electrocuting you. Then they threw you into a basement, without formal charges, and kept you there like an animal for eight months.

And now, in Isolation, they use you as a slave to cut metal every day, move tires, and build their military base—for two pieces of bread and a bowl of kasha. You know all this as well as I do. But you're worried about the people who've done all this to you and will go home after work with a clear conscience, have sex with their wives, eat some good food, watch a soccer match on TV, have a beer, and come back tomorrow to drive you to work again. Does it seriously bother you that they'll have to do some extra paperwork? Come to think of it, you don't even exist here! There were no charges, so there's no case against you. On paper, you can't even escape. Wake up, man!

In response, Denis asked me to remind him of these things more often. Indeed, obvious things need to be put into obvious words for us to really grasp them.

Eventually, on August 7, 2018, a cellmate who worked outside with Denis came back to the cell and to my usual "What's new in the world?" responded with the news that Denis had escaped. I hadn't known the exact day he would do it, so the news prompted both relief and new anxiety. It felt like a weight was off my shoulders:





nothing depended on me anymore. Denis's success was in his own hands. Of course, the next thing my inmate said gave me something else to worry about: "I can already see how hard they will torture me now."

He and Denis had worked together that day. Aside from the military base, various vehicles and equipment, and the prison itself, the Isolation's administration had developed, quite literally, a cottage industry on their land. You might find it hard to believe, but the very people that tortured their fellow men also cultivated poultry, nutrias (whose meat is similar to rabbits'), and pigs, and kept a vegetable garden. Prisoner labor, of course, sustained all of this farming, and the inmates were sometimes allowed to take back to their cells expired and damaged food that was intended for the pigs. Often these scraps were better than the institutional diet, and one time our cell's warder—a former military guy—even offered to share some kebabs made of the meat of the stray dogs that the guards shot that day for stealing chickens from Isolation. But mealworms in the candy is one thing, and eating dog is quite another. I politely turned the offer of such a delicacy down.

On the day of his escape, Denis was assigned the simplest of duties: watering the vegetables. The guard assigned to watch him, also a Russian, trusted him so completely (and, of course, also knew that Denis had neither money nor any ID) that he went to take a nap in the shade, leaving Denis alone with the hose. Denis didn't waste any time: he dropped the hose and ran to the residential neighborhood. As things played out, he ended up with a lot

more time than he thought he would have. No one even wondered where he was for a good fifteen minutes, and then when they did, they spent just as long looking for him without any hurry. The guards thought he had just gone to the bathroom. It was a full half hour before anyone realized Denis had escaped and raised the alarm.

The cellmate that had gone out with him that day had been sent to work in one of the machine shops and had no idea what had happened. If the administration were to torture him, I would be the only one who could stop it: unlike him, I was aware of the plan. If I volunteered what I knew, however, I would likely lose my life and thwart Denis's attempt, making it all for nothing.

Thank goodness that things didn't go that far. Every man in our cell was interrogated, but no one was put under any more pressure than the others, so when my turn arrived, I stuck to my mantra: "He's a Russian who came to my country to kill people like me. I had nothing to talk about with him. I know nothing about him." I knew that Denis had been imprisoned under a false name back at the Office and that the same fictitious biographical data had stayed with him in Isolation. Before his escape, he disclosed his real name to me and told me the reason the FSB had decided to give him the alias Nikolai Fedosov. Of course, at the time—as I was being interrogated—I worked very hard to convince myself that I had never known any of this.

With time the fuss died down, and Denis's escape was summarily forgotten. Most inmates didn't even believe he had escaped. They were instead convinced that

Denis had been shot dead and buried under one of the piles of slag that abound around Donetsk because the authorities simply didn't know what else to do with him. It would've been very convenient to tell everyone that he had escaped, and, again, with time that would likely become the common story of what had happened—which was another thing I had told Denis when he was having his qualms over letting down the “nice” shift. Denis did realize that he would never be released: you can only keep a Russian citizen imprisoned without a charge for two years if you are confident that your victim will never see the light of day again. This actually weighed on him more than the risk of failure, and we talked about it. A man who has been left no future to believe in is one of the most desperate and dangerous creatures on earth. We all need that pinprick of light, that dot that will one day grow and become a new horizon. People like me waited for a prisoner swap; Denis made his light where there was none.

Much later, after I was freed, I learned that he did contact the people whose names I had given him, but they couldn't come to an understanding. He was forced to flee Ukraine to Russia, where he has evaded the FSB to this day.

A HUNGER STRIKE IS NOT A WAY OUT

At a certain point my hatred of the place reached its apogee. When I opened my eyes every morning, my only thought was that I couldn't stand anything I saw around me—not because I had been held captive for a year by then, but because I was being kept in that particular place, in Isolation. I hated it with every fiber of my being—and this despite the fact that, on orders from above, I was being treated much more humanely than other prisoners. I had been pushed to my limit and I knew it.

My requests to be transferred to a regular prison received no response, except for one single time, when the reason for the denial as good as made me cry. At a regular jail, they said, my life would be in danger, and if something were to happen to me, it would obstruct the investigation of my case. Skipping ahead, I'll share that, when I would finally get to the Donetsk Central Jail, where I ended up spending only eighteen days before being transferred to a labor camp, my cellmates

would be astonished at my optimism and humor. They couldn't understand why I was all but glowing, why—in that bed bug infested cell, with its bare peeling walls and a broken window that let in an appreciable chill every night, among real criminals and amidst a total lack of hygiene—I was euphoric. I was thrilled to be able to relax and fall asleep—simply because I no longer had to jump up at every little noise at the door, or worry whether I had pulled my hood on quickly enough. At night, the only thing I had to fear were the bed bugs. Prisoners like me, who were transferred to an ordinary prison from Isolation, felt like they were on vacation. It had taken me almost thirty months to get there, and by the time I fell onto the cold cot in that cell, I was deadly tired of everything.

For now, however, I was still in Isolation and was being taken for a visit with my mother. We were allowed to meet approximately every three months, and I decided that this was my chance. I needed her support: what I intended to do would be pointless if news of it didn't reach the outside world.

Once my mother entered, I turned to the investigator and asked him whether he had received any response to all my petitions to be transferred. Smirking, he answered that I would never be transferred out of Isolation and would be held there until the end, if an end to my case could actually be reached.

It was then that I declared that I would be refusing all food until I was able to meet with someone from the United Nations and be transferred to a regular jail. My mother became hysterical, and the investigator lost

his smirk and shouted, with obscenities, that I would never again have a visit with my mother. He kept his word: the next time I would see my mother would be a year and a half later, after I had been placed in an official prison. I begged my mom to help me by sending news of my hunger strike to Kyiv, but our final minutes together were spent with her tearfully trying to convince me to change my mind, all the while listening to the investigator scream that he could only imagine what “measures would be taken” in Isolation in response to my actions.

As soon as they brought me back to the cell, an entire council of balaclava-clad people filed in—the entire management of the facility. They had me sit at a table, while the other inmates remained standing, straight as candles.

“Do you understand that we won’t let you die? We have no use for your dead body. The best-case scenario for you is needles: we’ll pump you full of stuff and, with arms full of needle marks, they’ll put you with the druggies when you get moved to a regular jail. If we have to, we’ll force-feed you with a funnel. Just think about that, and don’t make your life more complicated than it has to be.”

That speech was another dividend of my being a journalist. Being known had once again protected me: any other prisoner would have been thrown into the basement and wired to an electric motor, with a bowl of food on the floor next to him. No one ever negotiated with anyone in Isolation. Then again, they had never had a hunger strike before, so I was the first to knock





on that door. When the powers that be left, a friend of mine who was a medic told me that I had already done more than my fair share: “You should eat. It doesn’t matter if you don’t. You told your mother you were going on a hunger strike, and she’ll either get that message to Kyiv, or she won’t. Either way, going hungry for real won’t change the outcome; the attention you already generated will. There’ll be pressure on these people. But you should eat—we barely get fed anyway.”

His argument made a lot of sense. That night another cellmate offered to pass me a piece of bread in the surveillance camera’s blind spot so that the guards wouldn’t see. But I refused. The thing was that I couldn’t rely on my mother alone. I suspected that the investigator had had a talk with her and would’ve convinced her “not to make her son’s life worse”—in other words, to say nothing. If that was the case, I only had one option left and that was to slice my veins. I wouldn’t have been doing it with the goal of killing myself, but in order to attract attention. Isolation was, in every sense, a place of extremes, hence only an extreme act would be noticed. If this was indeed what I would have to do, I needed the guards to take me seriously. I knew that there were always informants in our cell, so my secretly eating a piece of bread would quickly be translated into a happy smirk on the face of whoever was watching the monitors.

The poor diet on which we subsisted in Isolation had its effect very rapidly. Whereas a healthy person can live without eating for weeks, I was unable to go out for a walk by the sixth day. In addition to terrible heartburn,

throwing up bile, a tooth that would eventually fall apart, and pain in my liver, I felt my feet going numb and chose to stay behind in the cell when everyone else went out for exercise. My cellmate told me that people on a hunger strike often reach a dangerous psychological point when they can't give up the commitment they've made, even when death is imminent—a point of no return of sorts—and it seemed like I may have reached it. Again, my friend was right: I was unable to see how this would end. Day after day passed, I felt worse and worse, but no one did anything: they didn't try to force-feed me, or drug me, or transfer me out of there.

Finally, one day after breakfast, which I had again refused, the cell door opened and a guard said, "You are all aware of the situation with Aseyev. In a nutshell, until he starts eating, the whole cell goes without food."

I heard unhappy sighs all around me, even from people charged with the same crimes as I was. I could certainly understand how the prisoners felt. My hunger strike wasn't their problem when they were already living on five spoonfuls of porridge and a paper-thin slice of bread a day. These men were constantly being driven to work and needed to eat.

I asked to be taken to solitary, to which the guard replied, "We have people everywhere, and they all have to eat. So, since you're here, this cell goes without."

And so it was that. After five days of hunger-striking, I began to eat again. I don't think the strike was pointless: many people on the outside heard about it. A public outcry ensued and, after keeping me imprisoned for

THE TORTURE CAMP ON PARADISE STREET

a year, the people holding me captive were compelled to record a scripted interview with me in order to defuse some of the pressure and prove I was still alive. But my strike didn't get me out of Isolation, and it would be another eighteen months before I made it to a regular jail.

WHY THERE WAS NEVER AN UPRISING

Anyone who hears about Isolation for the first time might wonder why, if every single inmate was subject to so much abuse, there was never an uprising or some other form of organized resistance. Let me attempt to provide an answer.

How does a revolt get organized in a typical post-Soviet prison or penal colony? A simple system is in place: the leader (or leaders) of the inmate population sends a message by word of mouth through the cells' or barracks' warders or via "small fry," that is, tiny, easy-to-conceal notes. Every inmate who considers himself to be "decent" must support the planned action. Naturally, decency in this context is defined not by a prisoner's personal ethics, but by their obeisance to the Code of the criminal world, even if the cause of the revolt hasn't been communicated. You just have to do it, and that's that.

The cause of an organized revolt often has something to do with an inmate at the top of the criminal hierarchy

being put into solitary confinement or the disciplinary unit. That's exactly what happened at one of the Donbas prison camps before the war, when a notorious crime boss, who is now one of the key decision-makers in the Ukrainian national criminal community, found himself in solitary. The entire camp revolted, but that didn't get him out, so later a small convoy of cars pulled right up to the prison gate and a few representatives of the criminal world explained to the camp's administration that the guard shift on duty might not get all the way home safely if the criminal in question wasn't restored to his old cell. In a situation like that, every criminal obviously knows that the superintendent can call in a SWAT team, and everyone parked outside the gate will wind up on the inside. On the other hand, the administration also knows that a SWAT team isn't a long-term solution because another gang of criminals will ambush the SWAT team afterwards, a few miles down the road. That's why large camps with significant inmate populations maintain a balance of power between the convicts and the administration: both sides know that there's a line no one is allowed to cross.

In Isolation, naturally, such logic didn't apply. The problem of personal identity was fundamental for everyone who was there. While in a normal prison the identity of a prisoner is based on his antagonism to the administration, which is precisely what enables a whole camp to act as a single unit and resist, this dyad of "us" and "them" was constantly being undermined in Isolation by the spontaneous rotation of prisoners' cell assignments and the administration's intrigues.



The question of identity is key. An individual's behavior as an inmate, as well as the values he or she is willing (or unwilling) to sacrifice in a crisis, depend entirely on how they see themselves on the inside. Isolation featured an extraordinary mix of people in its cells: doctors, long-haul truck drivers, miners, entrepreneurs, former members of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, dyed-in-the-wool cons who'd spent half their lives locked up in the strictest penal colonies in the country, and, of course, combatants of the so-called people's republics. Just imagine this melting pot when it is divided into cells of ten to fifteen people, where everyone is in shock and trying their hardest to make his or her life just a little bit easier. Under such circumstances, most people focus on mere

survival and their identity blends with the circumstances, with any personal autonomy lost in the process.

Many months of observation gave me the opportunity to see that only individuals of truly uncommon will-power could resist being depersonalized by the administration and associating themselves with this place. Such strength of character could manifest itself in people of radically different professions and views on life.

For example, one evening the guards brought in a new prisoner, and the Boss ordered an inmate in our cell to beat him. This inmate was quite a large man and could have used his size to his advantage—had he obeyed the administration. But he refused, so he was taken out of our cell and a former Ukrainian serviceman was brought in instead. This prisoner, by contrast, didn't hesitate to carry out the order. What motivated the former to resist and led the latter to make a different choice? I knew the first man well enough to say that politics had nothing to do with it. Yes, he was pro-Ukrainian, and that's what had landed him in Isolation. But his personal choice not to harm other people was due entirely to his intuition that it was simply the right thing to do, even if it brought on painful consequences for him. As far as the second man was concerned, his social role, clearly, had been entirely erased by his current circumstances. Yes, he had fought on the Ukrainian side in the war and had understood those whose orders he was now executing to be his enemies. But, in Isolation, none of this mattered anymore, and his will was subjugated by fear—a fear of becoming the one being beaten.

It's worth noting that Isolation's administration was keen on having inmates abuse other inmates rather than just haul a man off to the basement and have the employees torture him. This was the Boss's way of assessing individuals and then elevating those who were, under threat or out of pragmatic consideration, willing to cross the line. A man that complied and hurt another, mind you, didn't disappear—he still shared a cell with those he had beaten. Thus, in addition to the political conflicts that were inevitable when you mixed military personnel from opposing sides, there was plenty of personal hatred between inmates, and the administration used this to splinter any group that had shared views.

Inmates were constantly moved from cell to cell, a process they referred to as “muddling.” “To muddle” in criminal jargon means to pour tea from one cup to another. Analogously, people were poured from group to group. You could be placed in a cell for a few days only to hear the door suddenly open and the guard call your name, followed by “Get your things, get out! Now.” This was a matter of principle for the administration. For one, constantly being moved didn't give you a chance to bond with your cellmates in any meaningful way, to develop group solidarity. Secondly, as a rule, in every cell there were people who hated you, the newcomer. Either the new man had been involved in beating *them* up, or there was someone who had previously beaten *him* up waiting in the new cell.

Just imagine: you're being moved into a new cell of fifteen people, and three of them—so-called warders—have been literally wiping the floor with you, together

with the administration dragging you down a hallway of the prison in the middle of the night. The cell also houses a few informants that are lower in the inmate hierarchy and survive thanks to their reports to the administration. Spoken in very tight quarters with round-the-clock video surveillance, every word you say, even to someone you trust, never fails to reach the administration's ears within a day or two. For a while there was even a ban on whispering in force. If the guards in the Monitoring Room noticed that you were talking to someone in a confiding manner, they would pull up the picture full-screen and listen very carefully. And if the Boss thought you were whispering, you could receive another cruel beating.

Under such circumstances, making a realistic plan to resist was out of the question. Remember also how many prisoners of war there were at Isolation at any given time. Isolation only had eight cells, plus the Cooler, a "deluxe" cell (a narrow two-man cell without ventilation), and the basement. After they doubled the cot capacity in the basement by welding bunks on top of the existing beds, the entire facility had a capacity of eighty inmates. During the worst period, when people were being thrown into the basement in waves, Isolation held no more than seventy prisoners, a part of them women. Another part of the Isolation's prisoners—and a significant one at that—was confined to the basement, and the only way of communicating with them was by sending messages through the so-called "spooners," namely, the inmates tasked with distributing food. The "spooners" were always close to the administration and brutalized

other prisoners at night. Those in the basement weren't even taken out for exercise or work, and those who did make it outside to perform labor were kept in cell-specific groups and prevented from talking among each other. At any given time, a good portion of the inmates would be new, so the number of those that really understood the system and how Isolation was managed never numbered over two dozen. Paradoxically, the fewer inmates there were in a cell, the greater their chances of banding together and finding common ground. But even this core group was never able to grow beyond two or three people per cell—and these individuals were typically so wrung out mentally as to have, in a sense, nothing more to lose.

I should also note that relations between people that had been shooting at one another at the front without hesitation often reversed themselves inside Isolation. Earlier I had mentioned the Ukrainian serviceman who collaborated with the administration. But I also witnessed the opposite. In our cell, the appointed cell warder was for a while a former captain of the “Republican Army,” who was once asked by the Boss (in a completely inebriated state and referencing me), “Why is the journalist in your cell not under the cot and barking yet?” In practice, the question implied that the captain was supposed to kick me under my cot right then and there. But he did nothing of the kind, and instead made a joke and launched into war stories, thus steering the conversation onto a different topic. Considering his insignia and my views, it would have been nothing for him to carry out

the order; many inmates in other cells would have done so without instruction. When I asked him about it the next day, he responded, “These people shoved an electrode up my ass and roasted me slowly for a week. Once I had recovered a little, they wrapped me in a mattress and made a punching bag out of me. And now they’re acting as if that never happened and want to play a game of ‘us’ versus ‘them.’ Maybe for them it’s as if nothing happened, but I remember all of it, and I didn’t take up arms to have my own people treat me like that.”

This man’s view of the world had been shattered into pieces, like glass. Now his identity revolved entirely around his family, and not the flag that he had ceased to believe in. I was able to help him one time, too. Before his final court hearing, the captain was told to write down his concluding statement, and he asked me to do it. This was a unique scenario: here was I, a Ukrainian journalist convicted of six counts of “denying the sovereignty of the republic,” about to compose an ode to this “republic,” which would be delivered by a captain of this same “republic” who no longer believed in it. I can’t recall the whole thing, but I thought the last sentence particularly fine. “Your Honor,” it said, “in 2014 I took up arms in defense of freedom, and now I plead with the honorable court not to rob me of freedom.”

All this may seem absurd (and to a large degree, it was), but linear logic didn’t apply in Isolation: here, B wasn’t true just because it came after A. Sometimes it took only a week to warp a man’s personality and turn his hair gray.

All this aside, on one occasion we did attempt a small act of resistance, limited to a single cell. By that time, we hadn't seen any halfway edible food for about a month. There were stretches when we were given no bread at all, and when we did receive some, it was two paper-thin slices every twenty-four hours. The principal dish was a half-boiled barley gruel that was plain unsafe to eat, never mind its taste or smell. After yet another dinner of this gruel, which we again flushed down the toilet, I approached an ex-con, who had been in Isolation for a year (and hated it as much as I did) and suggested that we write a declaration of a hunger strike. Our document would also include another petition to be transferred to a regular jail: both of us had been sentenced by then and, according to local law, were technically being held in Isolation illegally. He responded that if we were to do something like that, we should do it together as a cell: unless all thirteen cellmates signed the petition, the two of us would just be thrown in different basement cells, and that would be that.

"Who do we have to work with, Stas?" he asked with a bit of scorn. "There are five prisoners that have done more than a year and understand what's going on here and why they should take the risk. The rest have only been here for a month or two, and they're just 'the common mass.' Like the majority of folks in any penal colony, they'd have to be pushed. Do you think they see what these bastards are doing? Every one of them thinks he'll get out in a day or two, or, at worst, will be transferred to a regular jail. You go tell them that you've been on your

way out of here for two years already, yet you're still here after being sentenced. You tell them about your hunger strike, about the prisoners that get stuck in the basement for two hundred days straight. These people don't get it. But the only way we can even try anything is together, all thirteen of us: that's too many to break down. If we go in just the two or five of us, it becomes another story."

Eventually, the five of us old-timers appealed to the rest of the cell. Whether it was out of fear inspired by my ex-con cellmate and reinforced by a speech in which he insulted and shamed all of them, or out of a sense of solidarity, the rest of the men gave us their support. I put together a declaration, and all thirteen signed it. To my own surprise, a few days later a commission from the Office arrived and questioned each signatory. Once they learned who the instigator and author of the text was, they turned my own interrogation into another humiliation session, not even letting me take the hood off my head. Remarkably, the cells on either side of us, whose population was on more favored terms with the administration, told the commission that they had no complaints about their treatment, despite the fact that everyone in Isolation was being starved.

For one reason or another, for the few weeks that followed, Isolation was supplied with rice and canned fish. Then the food again disappeared. There was no surprise there: the facility officially didn't exist, so officially no one was responsible for ensuring a supply of food for the prisoners. But that wasn't the point. The point was that, for the first time in Isolation, a group of us was able

CHAPTER 14. WHY THERE WAS NEVER AN UPRISING

to act as a whole, even if only within one cell. Because there was no one among us on friendly terms with the administration, we were able to do what we did, but expanding our success beyond the walls of our cell proved impossible.

MOUSEVILLE: WRITING IN SPITE OF

"What could be more senseless than composing texts in this basement, knowing that at any moment they may be burned in front of your very eyes?" This is one of the few sentences I still recall from the notes I wrote while being held in the basement. The notes were, in fact, confiscated eighteen months later. And yet, writing remained a part of me even there.

I wrote my first lines a month after being detained, once I had had a chance to recover from the initial shock and adapt to the basement's routine. I wrote with a pencil stub, on a manila folder that must have been dropped in my cell in the antediluvian days. The entire folder would later be covered in text, notes, and fragments that were beginning to cohere into a novel in my mind. I must admit that I am very sorry to have lost these texts, and not because they had become near-biblical for me: they were as exulted and lyrical as poetry, although I never wrote poems per se in the basement. I'm sorry to have

lost them because they were evidence that I had found the strength to pick up that stub and scratch them down, despite the abysmal stench of my own body; despite barely being able to feel my own fingers after torture; despite hunger, bottles of urine, and suicidal thoughts. That was the true value of that folder, and, later, of the sheets of paper I carried through my time in the basement and the majority of my incarceration in Isolation, until the administration decided to make an example of our cell, searched everyone, and emphatically confiscated every scrap of paper I had.

On top of this, writing in captivity is powerful therapy, as important as physical exercise. Paper could take the outpouring of my emotions—the fear, the dejection, and the despair that were eating at all us prisoners from the inside, like corrosion. On many occasions I sublimated my suicidal thoughts into writing, describing in minute detail my emotions and analyzing them. It's a well-known practice on the outside, and it was critically important for me in captivity. Using up time was also important: an hour in the basement can feel like a month, as time is refracted through shock and suffering like a ray of sunshine through a defect in a window-pane. The mere thought that this basement time might never end plunges a person into deep depression with no sense of a possible future. That's why even just jotting this down is a victory: you've captured the thought and developed it into twenty-to-thirty minutes of writing, stripping it clean of emotion and making the words your immediate target.

Yes, part of me always believed that my notes would be taken away and even the folder would be denied me. In fact, one night, the guards did come to my cell specifically to read what I knew they could see I had been writing for an entire hour. They didn't say a word. The door opened and someone pointed at the wall, which meant I was being ordered to step back and face it. The warden picked up my texts and after a minute left, still silent. He didn't take a single sheet. I picked up my pencil and spent most of the rest of the night writing.

Should I consider all that work for nothing because everything I wrote was taken from me? Without a doubt, no. After I arrived in Isolation and had realized what kind of place it was, I would recite my texts from memory like a prayer almost every night. I spent hours memorizing what I had written as I paced from cot to cot. Sometimes I even composed in my head as I paced, not daring to put words on paper. Some of Isolation's newcomers thought that I was losing it when they first saw me in such a state. And even after others told them that I was a writer and journalist, and that I wasn't just mumbling to myself but memorizing what I had written earlier, it made me only crazier in their still relatively healthy minds. A new prisoner is still thinking about his family, about being tortured, about a toothbrush and the bar of soap that we prized like gold in our cell. He's thinking about really anything except composing texts and then whispering them like a prayer, under one's breath, as I did for hours. At the time I could offer these people no explanation. I looked into their pale drawn faces





and understood what I must have looked like. Today—in my defense, so to speak—I can share that you’re reading some of what I wrote in *Isolation* as parts of this book, what I was able to recall and write down once I had been transferred to a regular jail.

Most of my texts from the basement, however, are lost. I don’t think that they’re lost forever though. You see, about a month after the search, as I pushed my plate into the tray slot for dinner, I heard someone quoting from that text of mine on the other side. Next to the inmate who was ladling out the food stood the warden that had confiscated my notes. He smirked as he recited them back to me while I was being served slops for dinner. Moreover, when I told him that he hadn’t repeated what I had written quite accurately, he replied, “Oh, yeah? No worries. I’ll look it up tonight and tell you exactly what it was tomorrow.” In other words, my moldy chicken scratch, which held meaning for me alone, was not only being carefully read but also preserved, kept for some unclear future purpose. I won’t be surprised if that man tries to sell me back my own work someday.

In any case, all I remember from those dark pages are a couple of paragraphs from the opening chapter. The manila folder bore my signature and the title *Mouseville: A Novel*. The title resulted from a conversation with the previously mentioned Russian prisoner, an inmate in the basement cell next to mine, who once compared us to rats being kept in small cages. I asked him, of course, if he had seen the movie *The Green Mile* and if he remembered *Mouseville*.

“Of course, I do,” came his gloomy voice from the other side of the wall. “But that was heaven for mice, not hell like here.”

Let me share a few short—lightning-short—flashes of what I recall from that manuscript. This is the first thing I wrote in captivity:

We are all lab mice. We are fed, shocked with electric current, and sometimes taken to bathe. Each man finds his own way to Mouseville, the basement of the “Security Ministry” of the “Donetsk People’s Republic.” It took me three years to get here. Then again, the click of handcuffs being locked on my wrists in downtown Donetsk only confirmed the old adage: you may think everything is fine, yet all the while someone is digging a grave for you.

Like all rodents, we really like sugar. Here, in the basement, it is highly prized. That, and our memory—nothing else is left. Sunlight, people, trees—all of them have been transformed into a petrified landscape.

I am also one of the animals they have turned all of us into, though I might be a tiny bit above other rodents because I know how to do something other than lap up sour, fermented soup from a plastic tray. I can convert time into letters—perhaps useful to no one, very likely never to be read by anyone. But I’m writing. It’s the only thing left to do when Mouseville falls into the night.

GOD BEHIND BARS

Religion always plays an outsized role for the incarcerated. In my early days in the basement, I had to listen to my next-door neighbor's long Christian Orthodox prayers, which, I must confess, annoyed me very much. At the time I still believed in god, but he made his praying sound so forlorn that, combined with the dull blue light in our cells, it made me feel as though I had been buried alive. This led me to ask my neighbor to pray silently if he could, or at least in a lower voice.

My university education, to my surprise, came in handy even there: for a few nights running, in an attempt to distract myself and relieve the tension all of us were experiencing, I delivered lectures on satanism, Buddhism, and occultism, pulling disparate threads of my learning together, which was a challenge in itself. Owing to me, one of my fellow prisoners in the basement even memorized the Nicene Creed, which, despite being of Christian Orthodox faith, he regretted not having learned before then.

I encountered an entire maelstrom of religious practices in Isolation. Any given evening would find the Orthodox Christians praying in a far corner of the cell, the young Protestant reciting prayers he composed on the fly, encircled by those moved by his inspiration, and, finally, a Muslim man yet again inquiring of everyone whether a certain wall indeed faced south to ensure that he was praying properly. With all these people confined to a single basement cell, the Muslim's religious practices became a problem because he needed to perform ablutions, using up water that was as scarce as gold. There were ten of us in the cell, and we received thirteen gallons of water per week. The administration couldn't care less whether we drank it or poured it over our feet five times a day.

Later, once I had been moved from Isolation's basement to a regular cell, I would meet ex-cons for whom religion was as important as the Code. These men would pray before Orthodox icons from dawn till dusk, while harboring hatred toward the Ukrainian government on the grounds that all its key positions were held by Jews, as they believed. When I inquired exactly what harm it was Jews had ever done them, it turned out that none of them even knew a single Jew personally. Upon my informing them that Jesus and the Apostles had also been Jews and, as such, making the sign of the cross before an icon of St. Peter could be viewed as an odd practice, they were utterly stupefied. The same applied to the imprisoned local militiamen: the number of anti-Semites among them that proclaimed to be fighting *against* the "fascist" Ukrainian government was beyond anything I had previously encountered. I recall telling

one of these men, a captain with whom I was on otherwise amiable terms, that the woman I loved was Jewish and that I hated anti-Semites as much as they hated Jews. I told him that it was only the memory of that woman that prevented me from cutting my own throat and that, since we'd already found a way to survive in the same cell despite his "People's Republic" insignia and my pro-Ukrainian views, it wasn't worth compromising the peace with his talk of Jews he had never so much as met.

Turning to my own religious beliefs, I recall the night I parted ways with god very clearly. It was the fall of 2017, and I was trying but failing to fall asleep on a top bunk in Isolation's cell number four. I was lying facing the wall after lights-out and had been listening for three hours straight as someone was tortured in the Monitoring Room on the other side of the wall. Judging by the sounds, a prisoner was being beaten on the genitals with a special pipe while being asked repeatedly about some letters that had arrived for him. The pipe made a characteristic snapping sound, so the whole thing went: snap, howl, question, then another snap. This had been going on for hours. My head felt like it was about to burst, and not a single man in our cell was asleep—and not just because of the screaming, which you do get used to after a while. We had no way of telling if the guards would come to our cell next to work off any extra frustration. I can't claim that anything special happened that night. By then I had more than three months of Isolation behind me and had heard someone screaming almost every day. Yet, for some reason, that night was the night I felt like I'd had enough.

Up until that moment, and since I had been a child, I always prayed before falling asleep. In two decades, I missed my evening prayer only once—on the day I was arrested and then left in the basement of the Office after being tortured. I had worn a small wooden cross round my neck since my school days. I was wearing it that night. Suddenly, a thought flashed through my mind like lightning: if god was omnipresent, then at that very moment he was standing right there in the Monitoring Room next to that poor guy and simply watching as smiling men tortured him. Every day there were tears, screams, and suffering. There certainly wasn't a drop of love in that place. At twenty-eight my hands shook like an old man's, and I had cellmates that had turned gray within a month of their arrival. If god truly existed, he was either very cruel, or couldn't find his way to 3 Paradise Street.

I knew that such reasoning was naïve—especially after five years of university studying Kant and Hegel, theodicy, and having familiarity with Job's experience: having lost everything merely because god had an argument with some beast, he finally plucked up his courage to ask, "Why should this be?" What he heard in response was, "And who are you to be asking?" Hence, theory had nothing to do with any of this. Other things were more important: shreds of wallpaper on the walls, the dull light, the screaming and moaning. These, it turned out, outweighed Kant's ontology. There comes a point when everything collapses, and you have nothing left except these walls and the clear, pure cruelty inside them. If you burn your hand and write a dozen tracts about the nature of

a blister, it will do nothing for your pain. Pain, then, had to be the mirror of my atheism. Somewhere deep inside my soul I still hope god exists. I would very much like him to exist, and I'd like him to reassure me that on that night he was, in fact, standing next to that poor guy, and next to me—as he was on every single one of the 969 nights of my imprisonment. I'd like him to tell me that it was simply the way things had to be. Why? “Because you are *without knowledge*.” That would be so very humane, but it would also be too simple. It was neither god nor the devil holding the pipe that night. It was just another man, and men make their own choices.

During my last month in Isolation, before I was transferred to a regular prison, I noticed that my cell-mates' habitual attempts at finding explanations for what was happening to them were becoming pathological: a spoon knocked to the floor or a dropped bar of soap suddenly acquired the status of a “sign from above.” Things became especially intense where spiders were concerned. The spider, in classic post-Soviet prison culture, is the “Master of the House,” meaning, the cell. Killing a spider or even touching one without good reason is strictly forbidden. White spiders are more favorable than black ones, particularly if one is crawling toward or onto you. There was a man with significant prison experience in our cell at the time, who'd done more than twenty years altogether, and owing to him the hysteria around spiders, dropped spoons, and water accidentally splashing from a tap onto another person reached its apogee. There was hardly anyone left who didn't believe in these

“signs”; consequently, there was hardly a day when we weren’t collectively expecting something that had been predestined for us. Key in all this was that, when a particular day proved to not be *the* day, whatever event we were awaiting simply got rescheduled for the following day, and if the following day nothing happened either, we would simply wait some more. On the other hand, if a spider descended from the ceiling, and then an hour later the door opened and someone was in fact taken to the Office, the cell would succumb to true euphoria, despite the fact that a call to the Office was one of a very few events that could and did happen routinely, without any help from the spiders.

Initially, I was angry: I couldn’t understand how these men—men of colossal experience, men who had spent their lives dealing with robberies, dead bodies, this war, disloyalty, and cynicism—could now spend hours staring at a spider and feel great affection toward it. Moreover, almost all of them prayed from morning till night, which I found hardly compatible with the mysticism of dropped spoons and spilled tea. Later, however, I understood that psychologically all those things were embodiments of their notion of god. These men felt better thinking that a spoon could change something in their lives on any day—perhaps compel the door to open and have them rescued from this place for at least an hour. If they were lucky, on the way to the Office they might sneak a peak of trees or a glimpse of the city, of real people living without fear. Whenever I got such a gulp of life—when I happened to glimpse at green leaves or

an apartment building through the crack in the patrol van's door—I could live on it for a day. Signs gave my cellmates a ray of hope and confirmed that everything was ruled by a higher power—that their suffering, that all of this wasn't meaningless.

I realized that I had no right to disabuse them of their belief. Yes, it was hard for me to watch them and know that the door wasn't going to open that day and the spilled tea was just that—tea. It occurred to me once that the cell had become a lunatic ward, where everyone was watching everyone else's tread as if divining omens of the future in them, like in turtle bones. Nonetheless, any type of meaning is key to freedom. It doesn't matter what a man chooses to believe when he's in a place where he has nothing left but belief. I used to kiss my small cross before falling asleep, and now I would kiss the photograph I had: I could study it for hours. How different was I really from the ex-con that paced the cell with a prayer book and a worn, old icon, all the while keeping an eye on the spider on the floor? Take away his icon or my photo, and you'd get the same result—emptiness. “You are the salt of the earth. But if that salt loses its saltiness, how can it be salted again?” Unsalted life—life without meaning—destroys a man faster than electrical shocks.

That's why religiosity in Isolation wasn't limited to icons. I remember the time a cellmate of mine received a note from his beloved wife. It was just a short, little letter, a few words of support that he couldn't even read without his glasses. On that first night alone, I must have read those three sentences to him a dozen times.

His wife also thought to put on lipstick and press her lips to the paper in a few spots, sending her husband a kiss of sorts. What can happen to a man when he receives such a seemingly trivial item! Nothing going on around us mattered to him anymore. He literally glowed when he looked at the note or listened to it being read to him. No prayer or icon could produce that kind of effect. I, too, replayed in my mind a hundred times the words of the woman I loved when my mother was able to convey them to me during one of our rare visits: I studied every comma and imagined her intonation, her face when she wrote them. All of this had to remain a product of my imagination because, at a certain point, I was prohibited from receiving any letters and the guards confiscated the ones I had brought with me to Isolation. Still, I could spend hours recalling every word. If religion could be defined as a way to fill your life with meaning, then the only thing keeping me alive was the promise of heaven as a future reunion.

HUMOR IN CAPTIVITY

Strange as it may seem, the greatest purveyors of humor in Isolation were the ex-cons, whenever one of them was put into an otherwise civilian cell. Humor in classic prison culture isn't just an important part of a prisoner's life. It's literally a lifeline that one con always throws another if he sees that a cellmate is struggling. And the more restrictive the regime in a given facility, the more humor emerges. Hence, the "specialists"—namely, ex-cons that had served time in particularly secure penal colonies—brought the tradition of humor to our world.

I remember a man from Dagestan that had done time previously, in Russia. Within the first few minutes of being brought to our cell, while introducing himself and joking with everyone, he suddenly asked, "Why are you all so glum, like you've got nooses round your necks? You've got to cheer up. How else are you going to do your time?" Of course, this man had been transferred from a regular prison and, after a week in Isolation, the fountain of his

good cheer had lost most of its old energy. But I have to give him his due: he had come to our cell after being tortured and held in solitary, handcuffed to window bars for nearly two weeks. I had seen dozens of people—ordinary, run-of-the-mill people—who wouldn't have been able to speak for a week after an ordeal like that. They blocked everyone else out, turned inward, and lived off their fear, the injury that had been inflicted upon them, and dreams of someday seeing their families again. In a word, their reactions were quite predictable and completely natural, given what they had just survived. By contrast, someone who already had “inside” experience practically always spoke about the whole ordeal with an almost painful humor and was instantly recognizable by this quirk. The ex-cons' jokes also differed radically in content and quality from the ones we, “the politicals,” told, and I think we were the mentally sicker ones.

I remember, for instance, a man being brought into the basement cell in Isolation one July day. He was wearing jean shorts that were completely soaked in the groin area: clearly, he had urinated spasmodically while being tortured, as did almost everyone that was electrocuted through his penis. Someone immediately greeted him with a smile and said, “Well, looks like you didn't get a blow dry after the haircut, eh?” The speaker had undergone the same form of torture himself, and possibly even worse, and yet somehow seeing someone else suffer made his own burden lighter. The same paradox drove the dry sarcasm of the banter heard in the cell all day long: “Forget it, no one out there needs you!” “Who's

gonna come rescue you?" "Relax, do your twenty and fly home a free man." "At sixty, life is only just beginning."

This, naturally, didn't fail to depress whoever happened to be on the receiving end of such banter, prompting a reciprocal cathartic jab at a particular weakness of the joker, aimed at plunging him to the depths of depression and despair as well. The joking went on casually, with tortured smiles, but the frequency of it revealed how much people were, in fact, suffering and unable to keep their dismay private.

Something similar also accompanied the selection of prisoners for work details. Back when Palych was still ruling over Isolation, he loved throwing the door open, punching in the back or kidneys either the man unfortunate enough to be closest or who hadn't quite managed to pull his hood over his head, and hollering, "Get to work, you scum!"—all with his sick sense of humor. Once he had been removed, the call to work was delivered with a simple bang of a rifle butt or a fist against the cell door, accompanied by the command, "Get ready!" Still, out of old habit, someone in the cell would inevitably call out in imitation of Palych, "*Arbeiten*, you scum!" lighting up smiles all around our small corner of the prison world. Drawing analogies between our guards and SS soldiers, and between Isolation itself and a concentration camp, made it easier for us to endure the terror that reigned here. During such moments of special Isolation cheer, our smiles would elevate us above our guards.

Our insistence on finding comedy in our lives did, however, have another side. Since I was the only person

never to be let out of the cell on a work detail, my cellmates often brought me back “funny” stories of things that had happened as they worked in the industrial sections of the facility. That’s when I would fail to relate to them completely: the comedy sometimes involved Palych nearly beating one of the “lowered” to death on top of a giant heap of confectionery products, which the prisoners had been tasked with unpacking and loading onto trucks. Another time, an inmate was hit on the head with a bar of expired chocolate from the same pile—an incident that elicited smiles for several days. Hearing these stories made me wonder if these men had forgotten what a horrible place we were in, and whether the “fun” was just another trick of our jailers, who would return later that very night to kick people under the cots after playing nice during the day. When I asked if they realized they had been made into slaves that were barely fed and used to cut metal and move munitions and tires by people who had just recently personally tortured them, they responded that it was better to distract oneself in any way possible than to carry on all day in a deep depression.

The issue of work details was subject to a separate conflict: there were prisoners among us who volunteered to work simply because they couldn’t stand being confined to the cell. Regardless of how poorly they were treated out in the machine shops or at the military-base construction site, working outdoors was a respite from being locked up inside for days on end with nothing but thoughts of the unlikelihood of the whole thing ending this year. Whenever they would volunteer, I always joined the minority

that opposed their decision. My motivation, however, had nothing to do with politics or ideology—I understood perfectly well why someone would choose to work. Work details left in the morning and often returned after lights out, and the men would typically come back so exhausted that they could barely make it to their cots before falling asleep. The next day everything would repeat, and time would fly, while for those of us that stayed in the cell, every minute felt like an hour. Additionally, those of us back inside the facility heard so much screaming and moaning whenever a new person was brought in and tortured that within a few hours we were literally at our wits' end. Smoking, which was strictly prohibited inside the cell, was permitted during the work details (which would have been unimaginable in a regular jail). Since the only other time we were permitted to smoke was during our brief exercise walks, this alone was enough to make some people volunteer to load or unload things.

Nonetheless, on my own mental scales, the torture and humiliation outweighed this small respite. There came a point when I couldn't even hear the voices of Isolation's personnel without being overcome by anger and loathing, when I couldn't bear to see a single inch of that place, not to mention these people, hearing and seeing them all day long or even smiling back at them. Whenever a new ex-con joined our cell, the objection to volunteering for work would grow resolute: as I mentioned earlier, according to the Code, participating in such labor was a serious infraction. As an old-timer once told me, "I never understood why the older men in the cell would





laugh at us and ask, ‘Are you cons or POWs?’ I get it now. Look at these guys just falling over themselves to work. A convict never does anything that doesn’t benefit him or his house. If I go out to work, I always steal a can of meat or a bunch of onions—something, anything. And these guys work for a bowl of rotten porridge and line up to be called. Sure, then—that’s just the kind of people to put in jail. They fix your cars for free, move tires, and feed the pigs, while the female prisoners cook and give you blow jobs at night. But how can I explain it to these guys? They’re POWs, like under the Nazis.”

I can sum all of this up into three models of behavior that were dependent on an individual’s view of life. The first applied to ordinary civilians, who had found themselves ill-fated enough to work for the Isolation’s administration and carry out its orders. The second applied to civilians, too, but to those that saw work as a small benefit, a relief from the psychological tension of our days. And the third applied to ex-cons, who tried to assess our situation through the norms of the Code—until they gave up and wrote the place off, that is. Still, each group had room for a sense of humor, and words such as “slave” or “slave-driver” acquired dark sarcasm.

The ex-cons had their own flavor of humor. For one, it was profoundly obscene. Their jokes revolved around sex and genitals, but these men had a way of joking in such a particular tone or with such perfect timing that we often did, in fact, all but fall over laughing. You couldn’t offend a single one of them with a joke told at his expense because all of them had already internalized the cultural

code of prison fun. For example, since Soviet times, inmates in special security prisons have been in the custom of calling one another Vasia. Thus, addressing someone with a “Listen up, Vasia” was received amiably, even though the addressee’s real name was obviously probably something else entirely. The custom had the additional benefit of making it difficult for the administration to tell who exactly was talking to whom. The name Vasia was also used in the presence of strangers or people that weren’t trusted.

Naturally, in Isolation this could cause an argument whenever an ordinary civilian perceived being addressed as Vasia as mockery, which was another reason that the ex-cons ultimately gave up on the place making any sense. They were a minority and realized that the norms of the prison life they had known did not hold true in Isolation. And so, like everyone else, they focused on surviving.

As another example of ex-con humor, let me quote what one of our “specialists” used to say to his civilian bunkmate almost every day: “Listen, buddy, would you mind just keeling over for a day? Not forever, you know, just until tomorrow? I can’t stand looking at your ugly face anymore.” On another occasion that same convict said to a cellmate that was getting over being ill, when the latter raised his plate to the tray slot for dinner, “Hey, where are you pushing and shoving your skinny bones? Have you looked in the mirror? You’ve got a day or two left, max three with beans. Let those patients eat who are still ambulatory—bed-ridden folks can lie flat on their backs even without food.”

It’s hard for me to imagine what this sounds like read off a page, but I can assure you that quips like this

were spoken with such goodwill and excellent timing that they never failed to cheer up even the person to whom they were addressed.

Over time the inhabitants of Isolation developed their own, unique brand of humor, one that probably we alone understood. For example, during another spell of not receiving any food—because Isolation completely ran out of food and a few days later even bread was gone—someone said in response to a cellmate’s hungry complaints, “Quit whining, will you? They’ll go hunt down a tiger and give it to you to try first because you are a goner anyway. And if you kick the bucket after eating that, so be it. We’ll let you go first.” Someone else chimed in, “Why would you want to get out of here, if all you’re gonna do is pay for tea in a restaurant?” One time someone came up with the idea of opening the Isolation Cafe after we got out: it would be located in a basement, and all the waiters would wear balaclavas and camo, and someone would always be banging on the other side of a metal door and shouting at the customers, “Move it along, you scum!” These little things, which only we understood, helped us survive even on the days when we went hungry.

I’ll end with this: on one such food-free day, a “specialist” offered me a piece of bread he had saved, the last he had, and said, “You journalists are all the choicest scum. You, however, deserve saving. No one will pay attention to what we say, but you’ll be able to tell about everything that’s happened here.”

Was that another joke? I don’t know.

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?

I wouldn't want to label those who abused prisoners at the Isolation facility sadists in haste. Without a doubt, many of them fully deserve to be called just that and are, in fact, classic psychopaths and sadists incapable of feeling empathy for the suffering of another. It was precisely the inability to feel another person's pain that enabled these individuals to spend years torturing fellow human beings for hours on end, and then go home to their families at the end of the shift and live perfectly ordinary lives outside of Isolation—only to come back to torture the next day. It's worth noting that I heard a very accurate description of such people directly from someone involved in my arrest in Donetsk. On the day after I was first tortured, he had me escorted up from the basement of the Office for another interrogation, and in response to my still naïve question of "What are you doing to people here?" this man replied with a smile, "Do you think a normal person can tie an electrical wire to another man's

dick, torture him for four hours straight, and then go home to his wife and eat his dinner in peace? I certainly can't. That's why we employ special people that are capable of such things. It's a job someone has to do." Indeed, this individual didn't torture me himself—he only beat me with a rubber baton—but he was present when I was being tortured by others and carefully noted all my answers.

Nonetheless, to say that someone is a sadistic psychopath doesn't quite address the matter adequately. What I mean is that we aren't talking about people who are so disturbed and aggressive that they have to be kept inside a padded cell separated from society. We're talking about people who, before this war, walked the same streets as we did, stood in the same line at the bakery, or perhaps brushed shoulders with us on the bus—people who still today walk those same streets without their balaclavas on, giving no indication that they tortured someone the day before. That's why the label *psychopath* doesn't explain the situation. In fact, it throws into question another label, that of a *human being*. Are these people human? Without a doubt. The obviousness of this answer is what's terrifying; you can't shield yourself from it just by saying that so-and-so is a psychopath.

Throughout human history and all around the world, there have been hundreds of places like Isolation, where one man's total power over another within a confined environment enables the former to enjoy the suffering of the latter. Neither politics nor other convictions have anything to do with it. There's nothing political in ordering several cellfuls of people to their feet and making

them sing Soviet songs for hours while someone is being tortured across the hall. Why would anyone do that? So that the prisoners don't hear the screaming? So that they can't tell that someone just had an electrical current run through his body? That's absurd. As soon as any of us heard cell number one singing, it was clear to us that someone was about to be tortured. The singing had the opposite effect: each song came to be associated with fear, and that's exactly what the administration counted on. They weren't making prisoners sing in the name of maintaining some state secret or following some ethnic or religious bias: torture was inflicted on military servicemen, long-haul drivers, business owners, and doctors. It was inflicted on everyone, for no reason whatsoever.

Here's another example. A man had been tortured for several hours and had signed everything that was placed before him. And yet, this wasn't enough. After the torture the guards carted the guy off into a cell, stripped him naked, put on some music on a cellphone, and made him dance for the camera.

We're talking about the essence of what makes men human—if indeed something does. Are these people aware of having crossed a certain line? I believe that they are. It's one thing to torture and abuse someone, and quite another to see yourself reflected in the mirror of a fellow human's suffering and understand what you have done. Let me give you another interesting example.

One day, a mere few weeks before I was transferred from Isolation to the Donetsk Central Jail, we were being escorted back into our cell after our morning exercise





walk. There were ten of us or so, and the man at the door was the one who had confiscated all my writings a year earlier and read my fairly restrained and brief essays about Isolation, in which I discussed the psychology of the guards and the prisoners. Out of the ten of us—which also included former Ukrainian servicemen that, by rights, should have been the object of these people’s most intense hatred—he chose to address me alone. “Aseyev!” he hollered. “Will I live to see the day when you are not here?”

Why did I, a journalist, annoy him in particular? To me, the answer was obvious: he could see himself reflected in my eyes. Having read my thoughts on the subject, he was presented with a portrait of himself every time we saw each other. He knew exactly what I thought of his “job,” even without my saying a word. I’m sure that he didn’t experience any pangs of conscience, or anything along those lines. If such a thing were possible, Isolation would have become as much torture for its employees as it was for its prisoners. Instead, social mirroring was at play here in the sense that Jean-Paul Sartre described: a man discovers who he is through the experience of being seen by another. And it is only in the conscious gaze of another that one can see oneself as an executioner—not when the subject is screaming, moaning, or begging for mercy. These people are used to such things. Their aggression comes out in response to such mirroring, as when you suddenly notice that the clothes you’re wearing are all dirty. This is why neither their psychopathy nor sadistic predisposition can deliver these people from the freedom of choice, which is why the mere act

of looking at them brings back their sense of accountability for their actions. This is also the reason why they cannot be tortured as a punishment for what they have done. What must stop us, humans, is not the moral argument, and not responsibility before god or the law, but only the possibility of this mirroring gaze that will instantly disappear.

A STRANGE SURVEY

One of the key questions in philosophy is whether the language used to convey a reality actually corresponds with that reality—in other words, how closely the world of things, emotions, and relationships communicated through language reflects the actual things, emotions, and relationships as they occur. In many ways, Isolation embodies the mismatch between language and reality. One of the few cellmates with whom I could have fairly honest and professional conversations during the entire time I was imprisoned once said to me:

All these things that they tell us on the other side, especially “We understand,” are nonsense. All these therapists, with their forms and handbooks that say, this is what you use for those at the front, and this is what you do with freed prisoners... I haven’t been to the front, but I’ve been under fire. I haven’t been to jail, but I’ve

been here for more than a year. No one will be able to understand what it was like here unless they were here themselves. Take you, for example: you can give a million interviews, and still you won't come close to describing this conversation we're having and the atmosphere right now. You won't be able to convey that our evenings aren't the same as everyone else's. Sure, we're locked up, there are doors and bars on the windows. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the knowledge that this door can fly open at any moment, and you'll be dragged who knows where for an unknown purpose. How do you communicate this feeling? How do you explain to the people on the outside what it was like in here? I don't know about you, but I personally sometimes think it would be better just to keep silent after we're released and not to give any interviews—so as not to confuse people and accidentally let them put labels on us.

Naturally, I don't remember what he said verbatim, but that's what he meant. And that's why I wrote at the beginning of this book that I still wasn't sure I was choosing the right words. I understand this problem—just as I know that many people that have gone through Isolation won't agree with many of my judgments, since any one of us may have a view of our shared cell from a different corner. We're all limited by the straitjacket of our personal experience, but that experience can be bottomless.

I will never be able to explain to my friend exactly what I'm feeling at any given instant, just as he won't be able to convey the fullness of his feelings about Isolation to me, even if I'm standing right next to him in the same cell. Our language is too poor, and every emotion here, in Isolation, is worth a dictionary.

That's why I try, as often as possible, to convey the reality of this place through individual incidents and other people's reactions, so that the reader can form his or her own understanding of what it was like as they read these words in a warm apartment somewhere far away.

I'd like to bring up another episode now. It illustrates well how completely we were absorbed by that place, how the word "exhaustion" filled every second of our being there. The following occurred at breakfast time, during a spell when Isolation had almost no bread and the food was basically slop that even a dog wouldn't eat. Everyone always filled their bowls—because if you didn't, the guards wouldn't even bother opening the "feeder" slot the next time—but then only chewed on his thin, napkin-like slice of bread. On that particular day, we all received a single slice of bread so thin (under an ounce) that you could see the palm of your hand through it. Most of the old-timers had by then been transferred to various other penal colonies or jails, so I was the one who had spent the longest in Isolation, being in my third year there. Only a few other people had been there more than a year, and the rest had done no more than a month or two. As we sat in glum silence around the table, one of us suddenly said, "I would give my life right now for someone to just

hit us with a good old Grad barrage—for someone to just shell us with those Grad rockets and wipe us off the face of the earth along with the prostitutes on the other side of the wall, this shitty napkin bread, these bowls of slop, and everyone that keeps the keys to these locks. To make up for it all, for all the lives they've broken here, I would give mine, as long as we all get buried here. There's no one here to pity and no one to forgive. Just clean it up and pour salt all over it, so nothing'll grow here for another hundred years."

This was said during the summer, in a cell with an air conditioner and a proper toilet bowl, with attractive, young, imprisoned women tending to the flower beds outside our window. No one raised an objection, no one added anything, and no one laughed. We just stared at the empty table in silence. No one was being tortured at that particular moment, and, amazingly enough, none of us in the cell were crippled or groaning in pain from broken bones. But the place itself remained hell for those who knew what we were talking about. And so, the cellmate to my left said, "Me too."

"So would I." "And me." "And me too." Everyone around that table, including the relatively recently arrived "guests" of Isolation, voted to die. There and then, without a second thought, we were ready to give up our lives—if anyone would only ask if our lives could determine whether Isolation would continue to exist.

Whenever I hear someone say, "We understand what you went through," I always remember that table and that breakfast—and the air conditioner, of course.

THE MAN WITH THE DOG

Were there any instances of humane treatment of prisoners by the Isolation's administration? Yes, it did happen. For the most part, the people involved were inmates transferred to Isolation to work for a period of time, and they never stayed very long.

One of the guards, for example, sometimes brought his dog along with him to work, and would occasionally let the dog come and stay in our cell or hang around while we walked for exercise so that anyone who wished could pet him. To a person from the outside, this might seem like a trivial thing. But believe me, when I first touched that dog, it was like I had stepped into a ray of divine light, so deeply were ordinary human emotions locked up inside me by then. An Isolation prisoner who isn't allowed outside, who doesn't see the sun, trees, or other people, who lives in constant shock and a perpetual vacuum, can experience true catharsis in the presence of another living thing, especially one as unsullied inside as a dog.

The very opportunity to pet a dog prompted incredible joy, as if for an instant everything had returned to the way it used to be and we were humans again instead of “faggots” and “scum,” as other guards addressed us. Sometimes the man with the dog would also try to cheer us up with a joke: he once told his dog that, if he ran into our cell without permission again, he’d have to choose a cot for himself in here. Even his “Good morning, it’s time to go for a walk” sounded pleasantly dissonant to us, conditioned as we were to expect beatings and profanities.

On top of that, this particular guard would sometimes take us out for an additional walk in the evenings, adding ten more minutes to our five minutes of morning “exercise.” It was on one of these evening walks that I saw the stars for the first time in six months, and the sight of the moon lifted me to a state of pure bliss. While other prisoners smoked in the corner, I stared through the razor wire at the stars twinkling in the cold air and thought about the woman I loved—perhaps, at that very moment, she, too, was looking at the sky and thinking of me. Irrespective of us technically being enemies, I am grateful to the man with the dog for the humanity he allowed me to experience in moments like those—most likely, without ever knowing what a great service he was doing me.

In fact, I am confident that he had no inkling of what his actions meant to me. This became clear during another morning walk. The smokers, as usual, were standing around the trash can in the corner, while the few of us that didn’t smoke lined up against the fence and gazed at the tops of the poplar trees that flanked a nearby road.

They were the only thing in the vicinity of any visual interest, since we were otherwise surrounded by the depressing concrete shapes of the facility's manufacturing sections. There was also a practical reason for studying the poplars: inside the cell, every object in our sight was close by, and with time our eyes would begin to ache and our vision deteriorate. Looking at a distant object for five minutes not only relieved our eyes, but also distracted our souls with an opportunity to rejoice at the sight of a living thing. It was while we stood there, gazing, that the man with the dog walked up and joined our line, and after a moment, jokingly said, "What are you guys staring at every day? Are there drones out there?" I don't think he would have understood if I had told him about the stars.

AN EXERCISE IN DEATH AND FREEDOM

The last thing I want is for the thoughts laid out here to be interpreted as a defense of suicide. Suicide is, in fact, somewhat antithetical to what I'd like to talk about. However, when a man has everything taken away from him, and his life is left limited to a few square feet of space and several years' worth of time to anticipate spending in that space, it is exactly how prepared he is to end his life that reveals the true essence of freedom. It wasn't death itself but being prepared to leave life of my own volition that gave me peace and a smile, even while being held in the basement of the Office where I first seriously considered such things. This idea that, even here, I couldn't be robbed of my right to die—in a place where, during the evening sweep of an already bare cell, even the laces of my shoes had been taken, and the guards would go as far as to take away the shreds of an old wall calendar that were lying on the floor—filled me with a kind of

internal light, as if I knew something that my torturers weren't privy to.

When you speak of your experience of death, it is bound to feel like you are stepping on your own tail: Isn't the very idea itself an oxymoron? Death cannot be experienced if we approach the question formally, diagnostically. Besides, there were people in Isolation that came much closer to dying than I did. One of them, for example, was taken out one day "to be shot": the guards pushed him against a wall and fired into the air above his head. I always say that, in cases like that, the physical outcome doesn't matter because it completely blends with what you're feeling. In other words, if a man is convinced that he is about to be shot, psychologically he dies when the trigger is pulled—with the full range of corresponding emotions, never mind that a bullet never so much as grazed his hair.

More generally, a prisoner's condition in Isolation could often be described as a mental death, accompanied by the atrophy of all emotions that are natural for a human being under regular circumstances. This is the state of hitting rock bottom—when people become incapable of even contemplating their own death because their function has been reduced to basic reflexes.

When I speak of the experience of death, I'm referring to the kind of cognition that unfolds around the reflection on one's freedom to make the final choice—to end one's own existence. This freedom is in no way associated with the actual act of suicide, which is most often not a rational but a psychological choice, determined by

depression and other causes. When I intended to kill myself in the basement of the Office, my desire to do so was realized in a chain of reasoning, whose final link was the freedom I felt knowing that I could not be robbed of my right to die. On the other hand, my actually committing suicide would be a result of all the suffering I was experiencing at the moment. It would also end the feeling of freedom I had found. Herein lies the paradox: freedom is a leap into death that is always one step ahead. Freedom is only possible if you stay alive. Such is the nature of the warped basement dialectic.

Thinking of suicide does have its therapeutic effect as well: accepting suicide as a possible conclusion to your life releases you from obsessing about it. When a prisoner recovers his sense of control over his life by arriving at the idea of his ultimate freedom, the thought of suicide passes through a sort of filter that removes the negative associations it would prompt under normal circumstances. This constitutes a second paradox: in the extreme conditions of Isolation, being prepared to die relieved me of the actual need to do so and gave me peace. My thinking went approximately like this: no, I can't affect anything that is happening to me, but I can end all of it at once whenever I wish to do so. Thus, a situation in which I was powerless appeared to return under my control. There is certainly self-deception involved, since a situation like that, unless it is lit by the glow of a future eternal life, resembles the desperate position of a chess player who decides to avoid the rules that doom him by sweeping all the figures off the board.





As a specific technique, I practiced visualizing my own death while I was in the basement, since, being depressed, I kept thinking about it anyway and realized that I needed a way to manage my thoughts. I tried to imagine what would happen the minute after I did what I had been contemplating doing for weeks. There would be no more torture, interrogations, cold walls, handcuffs, or hoods. The guards would be running from their station to my cell in the basement, but they would be too late. The rest would be paperwork, to deal with the problem they found lying on their floor.

I realized that I wasn't completely deluding myself. Somewhere on this planet there is a spot for me, a small bit of land six feet long and five feet wide that is waiting for me alone. Perhaps there's a house built on that plot at the moment, or a lawn, or a playground. Perhaps a dog just ran across it, or the wind swept it with a handful of dry leaves. This isn't theory—this is a fact of my future that is screaming to be heard in the damp present. The six feet are inevitable, but they are also my advantage in here. I can dig my grave whenever I want. What are rubber batons, wires, and electricity against this tiny piece of ground that will catch up with me one day no matter what? This cell, this suffering, and this torture are not infinite. The only infinite thing is the freedom I experience for as long as I choose this basement over a shard of glass in my hand.

Official psychiatric and therapy practices may very well disagree with me and regard my approach as dangerous and destructive. But a prisoner's main task in

that basement was to relieve the colossal psychological burden that came with being tortured, concern for one's family, and the uncertainty of one's fate. The thought of death, under such circumstances, was utterly natural and occurred to everyone I had a chance to talk to in that basement. This is why it was so important to develop a way of converting the thoughts of death into a virtual, psychological experience of dying—as something that had already occurred, in order to prevent it from happening in physical reality when you tie a noose around your neck. Treating my own death as an event I had under my control almost always had a positive effect on me.

This kind of reasoning is also appropriate for a nation state—if we return from the purely psychological aspect of the question to the metaphysical one. Here I mean a state that is consciously prepared to perish in its struggle against a more powerful adversary, a struggle that at first glance may appear hopeless. From the days of the democracies of classical antiquity to the present time, including the case of present-day Ukraine, the highest form of freedom has always been associated with the phenomenon of eradication—of the entire state or a part of it. In fact, the only difference between a prisoner of the basement with no chance of overcoming his circumstances and ancient Greeks prepared to die on the spot may be the collective nature of the ancients' experience. This is no “natural” death but is always—when a person or group of people recognize the circumstances to be more powerful than them—a suicide. That's why countries that fight wars for the sake of freedom themselves

embody that freedom in its highest form when they put their own existence on the line.

The problem, however, lies elsewhere. The topic of death nowadays sits on the same pedestal of hypocrisy that was reserved for sex a century ago. Even the word “death” itself carries stigma and prompts a confused reaction, which mostly consists of picturing the ritual trappings of a funeral. Death, as the most obvious and inevitable fact of a person’s private life, has become an awkward parenthetical in the life of a *socium*, just as sex used to be relegated to the fortress of personal and religious taboo.

The right to die—free of a diagnosis and opprobrium—is an epochal right toward which our social thought is only now making its first steps. This right could gather dust on moral shelves for years to come, remaining unappreciated. However, after Isolation, I cannot see it as anything but the encapsulation of the totality of our own choice and the highest form of freedom that made my soul smile during my days in the basement. So, when people ask me what constituted human dignity in that situation and whether I had carried anything positive out of those walls, I am confident when I answer, “This smile.”

NOT IN PRAGUE

What are the thoughts of an Isolation prisoner as he returns to freedom? I'm specifically referencing Isolation prisoners because the reaction of those held in regular jails or prison camps was fundamentally different. All of us were released to freedom from the Makiivka Penal Colony, where inmates from different places of incarceration had been consolidated before a prisoner exchange. And even there, a step away from freedom, we, former Isolation prisoners, remained the most dispirited and skeptical. That disbelief in the fact that one's ordeal may be over, or was about to be over, was a deeply held pessimism that I observed in almost every person that had passed through Isolation, myself included. As chance would have it, out of that entire group, I was in Isolation the longest, twenty-eight months. At the same time, there were people among us who, by the time of the exchange, had been prisoners of war upward of five years but had never set foot inside Isolation, and they were generally

**"The Office" of the
DPR "Ministry of
State Security" with
detention cells, incl.
in the basement**

DOK

**KYIVS'KYI
DISTRICT**

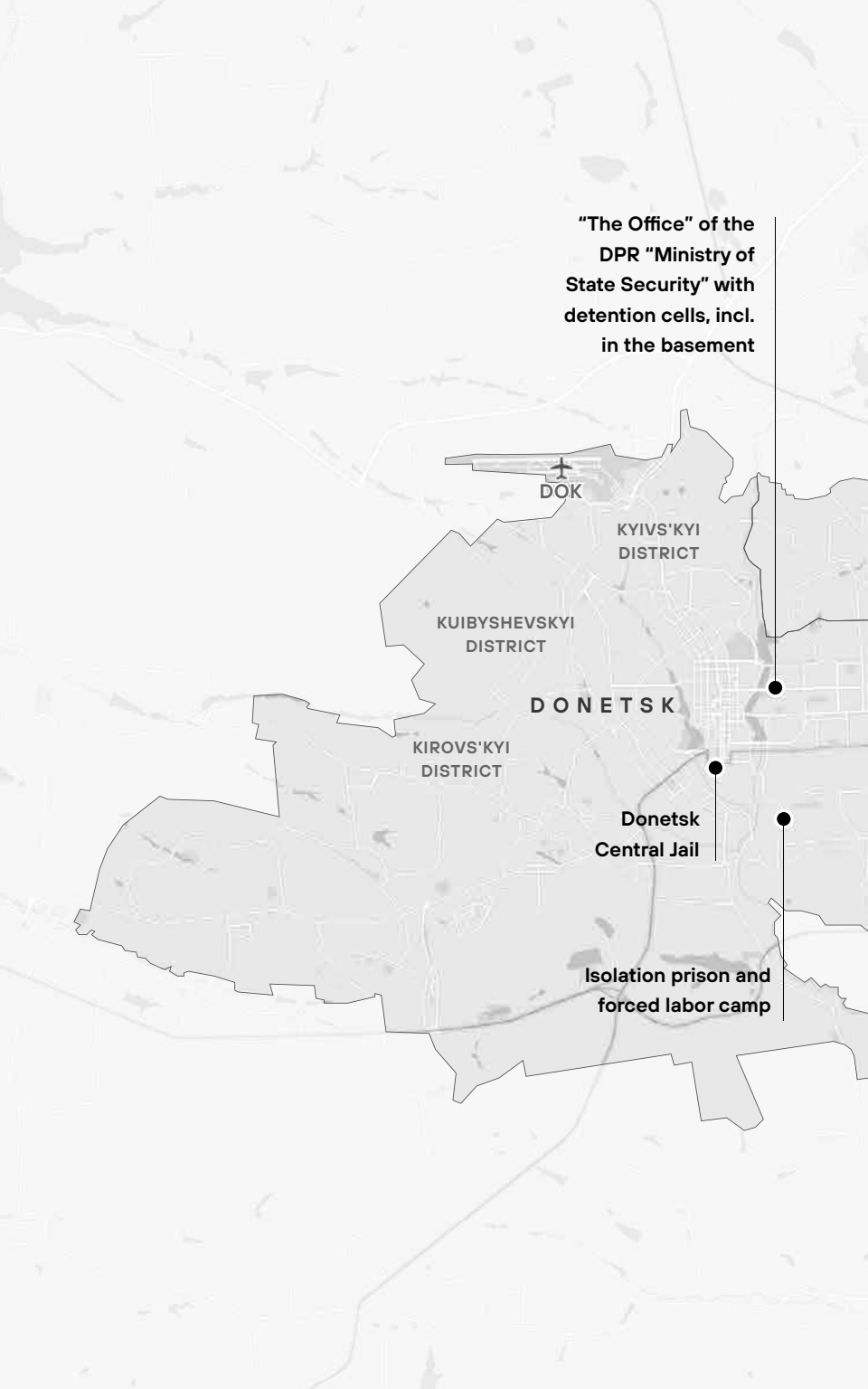
**KUIBYSHEVSKYI
DISTRICT**

DONETSK

**KIROVS'KYI
DISTRICT**

**Donetsk
Central Jail**

**Isolation prison and
forced labor camp**



**Makiivka Penal
Colony no. 32**

MAKIIVKA

**HIRNYTS'KYI
DISTRICT**

**Map
of Donetsk
and Makiivka**

the most optimistic and cheerful of us, despite having been imprisoned twice as long as we had and having been crossed off prisoner exchange lists several times over the years. It's no wonder that, even with our bags packed, we, former Isolation inmates, often felt somewhat shunned by the others, as if they thought we deliberately weren't finding joy in the prospect of crossing to the other side of the barbed wire.

Our emotional turpitude, however, was far from deliberate. We had spent all of our time in Isolation being reminded that we were nobodies, that there was no future, that women's screams and nightly torture constituted the only reality we deserved to inhabit. Somewhere deep down, we who had been through Isolation really couldn't believe that an end was possible, our proclivity for discussing what we'd do if we were freed notwithstanding. I remember one such conversation, literally on the eve of the exchange: my former cellmate from Isolation and I walked off to the far corner of our barrack so that as few people as possible would hear us. I asked him if he had felt relieved when he heard his name on the list of those to be pardoned, and he replied, "No. And you know why." We talked for an hour, while all the following thoughts swirled in my head.

Should we perhaps respond with the same cruelty as was inflicted on us and take it to its limits or even cross the limit? We had had our fingers broken, so we'll break their legs. We had had a thirty-volt charge run through us, so we'll run a hundred volts through them. They had raped one of the imprisoned women, so we'll kill one of them.

Should we take all of this to the point where Ukraine is flooded with one massive deluge of cruelty, finally making headlines in the global media? Then the diplomatic expressions of “deep concern” of our foreign allies would finally lead them to feel the bitter chill of the suffering that comes out of Donbas, where words no longer suffice, only actions do. Was Palych right after all on that night in the basement when he raved about being an almost-god because he was capable of getting through anything—all the screaming, weeping, and pleading his victims could muster—and keep torturing, and torturing, and torturing despite it all? Was this *thing*—by all accounts a creature, not a human—right and that is simply our reality? And what about us? We continue to doubt the reality while they are creating it; we continue expressing “deep concern” while they attach their wires to the next victim.

This is what I was thinking as we were flown, triumphantly, to our nation’s capital. I haven’t shared it with anyone before, but this is what I was thinking as I made speeches about human rights, even though I’ve never managed to find it in me to believe what I was saying completely. Human rights, the rights of humans—but wasn’t it other humans that had done all of that to us? Aren’t we capable of doing the exact same thing in a flush of ire and vengeance? “If I do the same to them, it’ll give at least some meaning to what I’ve gone through”—that’s what I heard, in much coarser terms, from one of the cons.

This is an absurd sentiment, if absurdity is even a category that can be applied to feelings. Sometimes a man restored from captivity simply feels that he has

to do something, anything, to make up for those years. Vengeance is a convenient choice. It's the first thing that occurs to you. You're still living the violence in the first days of freedom, even if you've surrounded yourself with your closest loved ones: it's just a matter of habit, a matter of your emotional pendulum having been covered with poisonous rust.

Had I acted on the urge of these ideas, I would have received another prison sentence. It's hard not to notice that this is just a sickness, another facet of trauma turned into a painful need for justice. That much is clear. We have all read the books that dissect people like us down to the bones. The more time that passes, the more these ideas fade, leaving only the ash of emotion in their wake. Someday that, too, will disappear. And this, again, gives you a strange feeling—of self-loathing. Didn't you know this was exactly what would happen? Didn't you say to yourself a thousand times in various basements, "Don't you dare forget what they've done to people here?" Perhaps freedom turns some people soft and makes them forgive and forget. It's like that cold I caught in Isolation soon after I was given a blanket: I had never so much as sneezed when I had had to keep myself warm with a bottle of piss.

There were times in Isolation when, after another night of torture, I would spend the day imagining how I would go tour the Ukrainian prisons where *their* prisoners were being held. I just wanted to look at them. I wouldn't even introduce myself; I wouldn't say a single word. There they would be, in a regular jail, with

a phone, with access to the Red Cross and the OSCE, with adequate food. No one would be raping them; no one would be kicking them under their cots. Their family and friends would always be allowed to come and visit. By then a year had passed since I last saw my mother—for the simple reason that I had gone on a hunger strike because all I *dreamed* of was to be transferred to a regular jail. The desire to be in a regular jail instead of Isolation, and for that they took the last thing I had away from me—my mother.

I thought about all this on my final day in captivity. I thought about it on the flight to the Ukrainian capital. Sometimes I think about it now, too. To be honest, I try to not think about any of it, but substitution is a darn poor tool. There's nothing that can fill that hole. But I have learned to push it aside. I haven't yet found answers to these questions, nor do I yet have an answer to the most important question, which for me isn't about forgiveness. I am fully aware that there are people on the other side who are having the exact same thoughts, and that they're just as sure that it's not I who should try to forgive, but I who should seek forgiveness. That's why we do indeed need an Arbiter of Fate, to get us all sorted: these people to the right and those to the left, and preferably without their making even a peep.

And so my most important question to myself is completely different. Who am I? Am I a well-dressed young man watching a beautiful sunset above red-tiled roofs somewhere in Prague who can afford to contemplate humanism? Or am I that caged little Donetsk animal

THE TORTURE CAMP ON PARADISE STREET

that paced miles between the window bars and the cell door, harboring thoughts of slow and torturous vengeance? Neither Prague nor the nice clothes can provide me with an answer.

WHITE NIGHTS

There is never any ending to Paris, as that Ernest Hemingway quote goes; sadly, war never really ends either. I realized this when my mother came to visit me in Kyiv. Just a week after being freed, I saw the person I had dreamed of seeing all those years. As soon as we embraced, however, I felt that something wasn't right with me. My longing for my mother used to turn me inside out while I was imprisoned, especially during the period when I knew she had no information of where I was being held and was still searching for me in hospitals and morgues. And now I see her—tired and worn out, but so happy to see her son finally free. She reaches out to embrace me and I hug her back, and this embrace holds years of tears, sleepless nights, illusions, and prayers, along with hundreds of bags of food that my mother exhausted herself bringing for me and that fed mostly the guards, since we only got crumbs on the inside. The embrace also holds the joy at having all of that finally be over.

Here it is, our new happy life. Yet I feel a strange emotion, almost a rejection of these tears. Every day the feeling grows, until it turns into a kind of anger. Her attention is now a burden: I can't understand why she would ask in the morning what I had for breakfast after I had had wires tied to my limbs. What kind of question is that? I've survived the basements and am fully capable of frying an egg. I tell my mother this and prompt her to cry again. Her feelings are hurt; she doesn't understand why I'm so cold and distant with her. At first, I can't understand it either. What's happening? Everything is OK now, isn't it?

To answer this question, I'll have to piece together the entire picture. A few days before I was reunited with my mother, I was brought to Kyiv from the sanatorium where all of us had been sent right after being freed. I don't know how best to evoke this image. When you first step out of bright daylight into the semidarkness of a church, the candles along the walls burn especially brightly. After a while, your eyes adjust to the dim light of the candles, and you begin to discern other objects, the crucifix, and so on. But in those first moments it's only those burning candles: they are the only thing you see. For me, Kyiv's buildings "burned" like that. As soon as we left the forest where the sanatorium was located and entered the suburbs, I found myself unable to take my eyes off the most ordinary high-rise apartment buildings. It was close to evening and some of the windows were already lit, and the whole city stood before me like a Christmas tree lit up for a little boy to marvel at. I felt almost feeble minded and utterly

happy, even though the sheer number of objects available to see physically hurt my eyes. That was the peak of my euphoria. Later—as is the case even now—I would crash emotionally. It was nothing like the drop-offs into sudden depression that I had experienced in captivity. Instead, everything would become more complicated: things moved smoothly, serenely, it was like taking one unhurried step after another down a staircase that had no end. Certainly, it must end somewhere, but, in the time it takes you to even have that thought, you've taken another step down.

I was never able to accept the Christian idea of Heaven, because how could Heaven be possible for you while you're aware that someone else was burning in flames next door? How could we lounge in divine light, knowing that some of our friends or family were damned to eternal torment? Live together, die alone: that seems to be the happiness equation for those who send their friends to die somewhere far from the world of the living. That's why I am convinced that the families of prisoners struggle more than the prisoners themselves. How many times I consoled myself in the basements with the thought that all of my family members were, at that very moment, warm and comfortable, and that the woman I loved was far away and safe. The instant I imagined us trading places, this idea would be replaced with the horror it evoked. I don't know where it's possible to find the resilience to live for years with the knowledge that, as you're falling asleep in a warm bed, your mother or son may be curled up on a mattress on a concrete floor.

I remember how a bunkmate of mine, a deeply religious man, kept trying to convince me that everything that was happening to us was punishment for our sins. Actually, you hear that same logic from all religious people. I always had the urge to ask him why the entire world wasn't in Isolation yet, or why the suffering had to extend to the little son of that man in the corner, who'd been asking for a year now where his dad had disappeared to. But it was too late for these questions, so, with great effort, I just nodded in silence. Whatever explanation or justification you found for our situation, it only made it worse. The more you struggle in a bog, the deeper you sink.

That's why I understood how my mother felt. I couldn't even touch what she had lived through during those years. She lost twenty-five pounds in the first month after my arrest. But I understood how she felt now that "everything was over"—just as clearly as I understood that nothing was over at all.

I remember going down to the Kyiv Metro for the first time a week after being freed. I fell into shock—and not just because I had stepped into an endless current of people after more than two years in a small cell where I saw only the same few men month after month. Yes, merely seeing young women smiling and carefree was an event in itself. When I boarded the train, I think I experienced what the Buddhists call *satori*, an awakening, but in reverse. I stood by the door and noticed a young woman beside me scrolling on her phone through pages of baby clothes. I studied her face, her vague smile, how carefree it was, and then I looked around the car and lost my will to live.

I realized in a flash that my experience wasn't known to anyone else and, what's more, was useless. No one wants to live with torture and the basements: people have babies to clothe. I suddenly felt as though years of screaming and pain were stretching into one giant smirk that was that metro car.

The feeling lasted until a military serviceman got on. When I saw him—a young guy in a camo uniform, whom I had never met—the rest of the car turned black and white and he alone remained colorful. He became my only link to this still-alien city, for the sole reason that he was dressed in camouflage.

Now, several months later, things are different. The grotesque metro car cast in high relief, whose passengers I felt I could read by touch like a blind man, is gone. Things have been rubbed flat. I study people and I don't see them. I have dissipated into them and have become part of the mass that absorbs, quietly and silently, all the sounds and screams of this war, like the walls of a padded cell. I no longer find it extraordinary to be simply reading on the metro or scrolling through pictures of baby clothes, even though I remain just as aware that there are still hundreds of people in those basements, and that someone is being tortured right now, just like before. I am aware of all this, but the feeling is gone. The shock of the first weeks and the constant impression that everyone is asleep are gone. But how brightly did that car "burn" for me when I boarded it that first time! Facial expressions, gestures, all the details and nuances—I measured it all against the template of the basement

tables. None of it passed the test; everything was trivial and ordinary. *Do you even know?* And now, *Do I even know?* And do I have to know? Why should anyone live with a knowledge that would keep them awake at night?

Actually, I barely sleep as it is. After thirty months under the light of the hot lamp that couldn't be turned off, I stay awake in the dark and only fall asleep in the morning as the sun rises. I had never wondered about the lights in people's windows at night, whether they signaled anything other than someone having insomnia. Gradually, you begin to fear the room itself: you can fill it with an entire world, but you'll still be in there alone. White nights aren't always a matter of geography. Sometimes they come with a war.

And then there was the fridge—the remains of the syndrome, you could say. Any time I opened it, I worried that everything in it could disappear, vanish. What if I went back to the basement, for years? Back to the two slices of napkin-thin bread, rotten porridge, and slop... Impossible, you say? Well, let's rewind things and watch what I was doing an hour before I walked into the impossible for almost a thousand days. A breakfast of farmer cheese with raisins and sour cream, a warm bath, pleasant music, and new cologne—a perfectly ordinary morning in May. There were no signs of impending doom, no omen to suggest I wouldn't taste farmer cheese again for a few years to come.

I was afraid. It wasn't a fear of the basement, however. I had recovered enough to know that that wasn't what I was afraid of. It was the absurdity that terrified

me—the not knowing, the absence of any meaning that could even approach accounting for that abyss as narrow as an hour. From the white bathtub with hot water to the cold bars and faded walls, only an hour passed, and my life changed for almost three years. These thoughts eat at me from the inside.

After I was freed, I cried a number of times at night. I wept, and I don't recall my ever doing so either before or during captivity. (Actually, I didn't cry even while being tortured. That wasn't a time for heightened emotions; I was reduced to convulsing muscles.) Each time the tears came so abruptly that once I just sat in a heap on the floor. At thirty, crying isn't very attractive, but the sense of loneliness I was feeling, added to everything I had gone through, just turned me inside out a couple of times. I couldn't stop sobbing like a child. Maybe that was my way of asking, what was it all for? The worst part is that there is no one I can ask this question of. It comes from inside me and is addressed to myself, like an echo in a cave. I still think that tears are better than vodka: many freed men have tried drowning their years on the inside in it. In Isolation, I had a cellmate who had been a prisoner of war in Afghanistan, where he spent a month in a hole in the ground. He said that, for two years afterward, he "just punched people in the face" and screamed at night. I remember his words like it was today: "The most important thing is to not rush to be among people. I made that mistake. You have to go slowly, little by little."

They say that the devil is in the details. That's true. It's especially true for someone who's like a match inside,

flaring up at contact with any little thing. You don't know where this little thing will catch up with you, where you'll be when it grabs you by the neck and dunks you head-first into despair. Maybe you'll be in a bathroom, or at a market, or on the metro. Any little thing that tips you off balance lights up an association between being tired and what you've gone through. And after that, you just finger your options of getting out, like prayer beads. It's a strange feeling. To turn completely poetic, such moments remind me of a summer garden where all the birds have suddenly fallen quiet. The world falls silent, and you're left absolutely alone.

I remember how, about a month after being freed, the showerhead in my rented apartment suddenly started dripping. It was a little thing—nothing really, just a worn-out rubber washer in need of replacement—and yet, I all but threw myself out the window. For no reason whatsoever, standing there under the shower, I suddenly thought: Why should I have to deal with this? Why can't things now, after I've been through torture, basements, and humiliation, be perfect? At the very least the damn shower! And you know what happened the next morning? I was utterly elated to walk through a street market and allow myself to be occupied by something as trivial as buying a new rubber washer instead of listening to someone scream under torture too loudly to be drowned out by singing songs made up by prisoners of World War II.

It may seem odd, but it is in moments like that one in the shower that I truly know how foolish it would be to commit suicide now. I know that these thoughts are

part of my trauma. I know this in my mind, but I don't feel it in my heart. I find myself always remembering Yasunari Kawabata who wrote, "However alienated one may be from the world, suicide is not a form of enlightenment," and then killed himself at the end of his life. There's your triumph of intuition over reason! However hard you try to convince yourself of what should be, what *is* outweighs it.

Well, being a free man—much like loving—is something one has to learn. I can't seem to overcome this divide. What am I talking about? The Donetsk Central Jail only had one exercise yard from which you could see, through the gap between a sheet of metal and a concrete wall, a sliver of the city: the Kosmos Circus and a few high-rise apartment buildings. Since the "Security Ministry" transported its prisoners with hoods or bags over their heads, you could go a year (or more) without seeing anything at all except the inside of your cell and the tops of poplar trees during your five minutes of daily exercise. At the regular jail, there was no more need for the hoods, but our cell's window faced a wall, so when we were let out into the yard with a view of Donetsk—that single time—we took turns gazing at the buildings, five minutes each, and that was an event. It was a sad sight: three grown men spying at high-rises through a tiny gap.

And then two months later here I am, surrounded by the architecture of Prague and Strasbourg. I'm free. I give speeches about human rights and then go back to my hotel in the historic part of town, where a hot bath and a view of a magnificent cathedral await me. I'm warm

and comfortable here, but I keep thinking about a certain man I never even met. I thank god I never saw him because he was dying a horrible death in cell number one in Isolation, while I was kept in number four. I heard his story much later, at the penal colony, but it had its effect on me nonetheless.

The man had had his spleen ruptured and other internal organs damaged during a beating, and afterward his skin started to turn gray in splotches. When his cellmates told Palych about it, his response was to come into the cell now and again and beat the poor guy even harder, announcing to everyone that he was faking being hurt. All in all, the man was in agony for three days. He began to hallucinate: he thought he was hugging his wife and talking to her. Someone who had been in the same cell and had seen a lot in Isolation described those three days as some of his most terrifying there. After the three days the man died, and his cellmates were all angry at having to sign a statement that he had hurt himself.

An hour ago, I was told that I had earned this Strasbourg, this hotel, this Gothic spire lit up by floodlights. But what about that man? Where was his reward? All he had earned was the chance to hug air instead of his wife before dying. Perhaps he was just a little happy in those last hours if he truly thought his wife was right there. Yet still, where is *his* spire? And here a tempting notion emerges, an almost Biblical thought: he couldn't have written about it all. He couldn't have become "useful," and that's why he didn't survive—another rationalization, another clear equation amidst the chaos of daily

randomness. As soon as I contemplate providence, however, I find myself thinking that the path that led me out of a damp basement in Donetsk and to a hotel room in Strasbourg can't be explained rationally but requires divine intervention. I remember men like that prisoner. Unless the good Lord in Heaven shuffles our names like a deck of cards, I am utterly at a loss as to why things should be the way they are. I may never make my peace with the absurdity of it, going from heat to ice and back again. If a cathedral spire still bothers you, you must, in some sense, still be imprisoned. Once again, being a free man—much like loving—is something one has to learn, and I, like a toddler, am taking my first steps.

To be honest, one thing that really isn't helpful on this path is people's advice. As soon as yesterday's prisoner is free, his freedom turns into a free market of ideas concerning how he can "find his life." Sincere efforts to help someone with advice often repress the very emotions they aim to elicit, and instead of sympathy you get rejection; instead of a smile, tears; and instead of peace, anxiety and anger.

The worst and most trite suggestion to make to a liberated prisoner is that he or she should "forget all of it." Aside from asking the impossible and thus prompting an instant dislike for anyone who makes such a suggestion, it touches on a bigger issue. I remember how, before the war, during an oral exam on Catholicism, a professor of mine asked, "What is left of an individual after death, when he meets god?" I was momentarily shocked by the question: how could we even contemplate something

like that? But the answer turned out to be fairly logical. “For instance, what about memory?” the professor asked. “People must be able to remember what it was that earned them their reward or punishment. Without the past, the heavens are unjust, are they not?” “Absolutely,” I would say a thousand times today. “Yes, indeed.” Collective memory can be changeable and wrong: people easily renounce things that entire generations before had held in their memory as sacred. An individual’s memory is doomed to be accountable. It is only here, somewhere in our own past, that we may approach the divine, even if god does not exist. One’s past cannot be replaced with a commercial, it cannot be re-made into a highly fictitious TV story. To remember is to be human. In this sense, Isolation left us the gift of the nails and the cross.

Along the same lines, don’t insult people who have been tortured with electric shock and held in basements for years with the words, “We understand.” I doubt any such liminal experience can be understood at all. Often, we former prisoners of Isolation can’t even understand each other—and we were held in the same basements and felt the same voltage coursing through our hands. I would never say, for example, that I understood the experience of the major that had been brought to Donetsk from Luhansk and became my cellmate in Isolation. He didn’t even know where he was: back in Luhansk he had had a potato sack pulled over his head that hung down to his waist. The sack was taped shut, and that’s how he was driven, for many hours, while being kicked the entire time. Before that he was held in a basement in Luhansk, where

he could hear his girlfriend sob and scream on the other side of a door: she had been brought there specifically for the purpose of tormenting him. He wasn't tortured in Isolation, but back in his own native "republic," for which he had fought. They flooded his cell until the water was ankle deep and then ran electricity straight through it. Can I understand what he's gone through? I doubt it, just as I'll never understand the experience of the Ukrainian serviceman, a father, who saw his own child for the first time after five years in captivity.

And it's not a question of which one of us has had it worse. There are no scales that can weigh one such day against another. And yet all this doesn't make us special. When a person like that is freed, he or she quickly realizes that being special only means a place in a long gray line after some paperwork. You must accept that the only person whose understanding you can count on is yourself, and not always even that.

That's why yesterday's prisoner needs to be agreed with, rather than supported: hold back your empathy and just nod in recognition of his pessimism. This pessimism will one day vanish, too. For most of us, it's not a fixed outlook but a simple emotion. It's very deep and very painful, but it's nonetheless only a feeling, and time will one day wipe it away as a wave wipes drawings that scar the beach. To erect an entire worldview out of emotions, to fix the past in personal meanings is a task only for someone who already realizes time won't help him. With people like that, it's important not to miss this moment—when their personal pain transforms into

a psychological poison that will ruin their life. Emotional reaction must be converted into reasoned thought. Yes, what happened did happen, and things couldn't have been different. Then you put a big, fat period at the end of that sentence, so that you don't, with time, feel the temptation to make it into a comma and continue with a "but."

Making comparisons is another mistake that optimistic psychologists attempt to force upon those who have been through hell. Saying that someone has it even worse can only do harm: a former prisoner might think that this is a way of denying his own personal experience, of diminishing it. As a rule, the inmates of Isolation are well aware of the unwritten law of the universe that says, "There's always somewhere lower to fall to" and are fully capable of making comparisons themselves. Still, it isn't acceptable to prompt them like children. My personal experience, which doesn't aspire to be any indication of the general rule, has taught me that the scalpel made of hundreds of compressed volumes of psychology, when used to dissect the mind of a former prisoner of war, does nothing but cut loose the last threads of the subject's patience.

I remember running into a former cellmate of mine in Kyiv about a month after my release. Our assessment of the overall situation and the sensations with which we had been living here, in the free world, produced a phrase that made us laugh wholeheartedly. Naturally, we both understood that having a "tough time" out here, as free men, and a "tough time" in Isolation were two different things, and it was only when we recognized ourselves balancing between these two negatives that we could find

laughter and relief. In my self-rehabilitation, I always begin with, “Everything was bad, and it is not relative.” People had their lives ruined, many were raped or sustained disabling injuries, and these facts don’t depend on the point of view from which they’re being observed. We have to live with this. That is why it’s better to work with the facts themselves than with any attempts to lead the former prisoner to see things in a positive light. Any such attempt—made, as it must be, against the background of the suffering and torture that the prisoner has gone through—is sure to elicit resistance and turn the well-meaning adviser (be they a doctor or a friend) into an enemy.

We have to accept that life is unfair and that, moreover, things could be even worse. It’s possible that the question of fairness has no one of whom it can be asked, and all we have are bare facts without any hope of meaning. Yes, once upon a time you lived within a system of predictable meanings that most people share and accept: home, career, and family. But then one day, without any warning, you found yourself in a basement, stripped naked, with electrical wires attached to various body parts. That doesn’t fit anything generally said about life; no theory can explain it. The “without a warning” part gives you particular trouble. What does it mean? That forty years on this planet didn’t provide you with enough experience? Of course, they didn’t: your life hadn’t previously encompassed this day, so how could it possibly foresee or explain it? You have no job anymore and no home, and your friends and family left Donetsk lest they find themselves in the same cell alongside you. You spend a couple

of years like that and then: bright-bright lights, you're free (which can in some ways be more complicated than surviving a basement).

People who have survived this lose any sense of their worth in terms of time: not only can they not comprehend the past, they are also at a loss in the present, which has already been taken away from them—suddenly and without warning. Should they begin anew? What for? And how, when no one can fathom what they've been through (not even their family and closest friends) and their “new life” fits into a gym bag, can one suggest they fill out a few forms? This isn't an abstract, relative “tough time” they're having, but a very concrete “tough time,” which must not, under any circumstances, be shoved back into the closet of their subconscious. Yes, everything that happened might happen again tomorrow. Knowing this is what sets us apart from everyone else. Most people know that such things are possible, but knowing this isn't enough to understand it.

Living free for several months now, I've been regressing emotionally—from the euphoria of the first day to the severe depression of today. However, the fact that I understand and accept this is precisely what enables me to move forward, as opposed to focusing exclusively on my trauma. The problem isn't that humans live in a world of absurdity and pain; the problem is that we try to convince ourselves otherwise, that we try to escape into a child's smile or a loved one's embrace. Obviously, these things are also meaningful, but believe me: once you've glimpsed the world of bare-naked cruelty, the

experience will come back to haunt you in the future unless you deal with it here and now. You could, instead of confronting it, flee from it: “find something positive” in it, as psychologists suggest, or “change your attitude rather than trying to change the facts.” Timeworn bromides here are a dime a million, but the question is whether any of them could stop you from jumping off a bridge. What I am trying to convey here is that no experience of this nature can be communicated at all, and one must honestly reach one’s emotional rock bottom before pushing off and emerging again.

Life is absurd: that’s a fact. The more intelligent people are, the harder it is for them to deal with this absurdity. In Isolation, two categories of people had the best chances of survival: ex-cons who already had significant experience surviving in such systems, and the least intelligent and most mundane personalities who just complied with the system without thinking about what was happening. Owing to their usually concomitant physical strength, such people played for the administration team and existed within the confines of eating and sleeping, spending no time on reflection. The ex-cons basically did the same, with one fundamental difference: they could see perfectly well what was happening because of their previous years in the penal system and similarly chose not to spend any time on reflection. They, however, tried to stay as far from the administration as possible. Those who’ve been in “sealers” always said, “You’ve got to pace yourself. If you have ten years to do, there’s no use eating yourself in the first twenty-four hours. The smartest die first.”

There's another fact to consider: unless you intend to kill yourself, you still have to live the rest of your life. This is less obvious than it might appear. Often a person has mentally reached the state of suicide without actually committing it. This can last for months or even years, with the individual somehow keeping afloat on the outside while every day, inside, they slowly die. Such a person opens his or her eyes in the morning, and this alone annoys them. That's why it's so important to make this decision early, to answer this liminal question: if you're going to remain on this earth, there is no point in keeping yourself in an emotional coffin. It's either one, or the other. The middle is the worst choice because that's where psychological terrorism begins, leading a former prisoner to use his trauma as a bargaining chip, as an excuse for every single thing in the world, and to demand to be understood while they have rewound their age to the point of being a five-year-old.

I can't make myself not think, but I have another escape hatch—these words. I can write it all down. It's not much, but it's something. To make peace with this absurdity, to become a part of it and overwhelm it with my own life while I force it into meaning—that's my general plan. I think it was Julio Cortázar who said, "The only way to get rid of monsters is to believe in them."

I have another tool, of course—running. It's not a cure-all and merely relieves the symptoms rather than addressing their cause, but, as soon as I feel myself becoming indifferent to everything around me, when I start feeling that any word or thought would be superfluous,

I put on my sneakers and run. Running, since the time of my dreams about the Foreign Legion, has given me the illusion of having a goal. It doesn't matter where I run, as long as I'm running. Sometimes I break into a run in the middle of the city, for a mile or two, even in the wrong clothes. What matters is to not let that feeling consume me. It comes up suddenly and anywhere, even in the most beautiful spots. I break out of feeling dead ended in concrete and steel with the sound of my feet hitting the same concrete and asphalt.

I feel better in Western Europe—not much, but nonetheless better. It's a different world out here, and it is, in its ways, luxurious. The luxury lies not in the neatly cobbled streets and expensive clothes, but in things like the corner cafe where people share pictures of their grandkids in the middle of the day over a cup of coffee and a piece of cake. The luxury of Western Europe is peace, the peace of which I am robbed even in Kyiv, where I still have to think about registering my firearm and am compelled to look over my shoulder after every interview before I enter my own building. In Prague, war disappears. In Kyiv, it lives under the stairs.

Nevertheless, rudiments of the basement mindset haunt me in Prague, too. I can run away from the entrance to my building, where I might get killed, but I drag my unhappy consciousness with me. I remember catching myself, in the bathroom of a Prague coffeehouse, staring at a gap in the ceiling left by a lost ceiling tile where the daylight was coming through. At that moment, I was wondering where the vent led to and how close the backyard

was. This is a habit that's still with me. In captivity, you keep these two concerns at the front of your mind around the clock: suicide and escape. You do so not because you're mad or disturbed. You do so because not to do it is, in fact, madness; because you are in a place that holds worse futures than a quick death. And now, two months after being freed, in a city full of peacefully sleeping restaurants and family photos, I still look at a vent and weigh my options. How long before I stop doing this? How long for a lost ceiling tile to become just a ceiling tile and for me to stop worrying about locks? These are my white nights, the light that torments me and keeps me awake.

I run to the top of the hill where there's a dazzling view of this magnificent city. The red-tile roofs glow in the quiet sunset, dusk falls upon the river, and I think about Donetsk.

There are still people there, in those small cages. The blue light just came on. I bet they were given boiling water for dinner...

Prague

2020

**WRITINGS
FROM
ISOLATION**

CHRIST IN A GULAG

A Play in Two Acts

Author's Note

The idea for this play came to me after a conversation in the basement of Isolation with someone who had stood on the other side of this war's barricades. Despite the fact that this man was suffering at the hands of the system for which he had fought, he was still convinced that "there was no other way." In other words, he found his own torture, and the torture of others, and the basement itself to be perfectly justified and inevitable.

This play is dedicated to this type of character, of which I first learned during a lecture given by Professor Duluman. By showing the totalitarian past, the play reveals the current Ukrainian present and conveys a small hope of finding a response to all the victims who justify their executioners' actions.

*To the memory of Professor Duluman,
whose tale became the foundation of this plot*

ACT I

A dark barrack in a penal camp. Limping, N. walks down the narrow aisle between bunks. He lies down on his lower bunk, and the face of an elderly bespectacled man appears above him, leaning over from the top bunk. A. P. studies N. carefully, adjusts his glasses, and settles back onto his bunk.

A. P. *(quietly)*: Did they beat you?

N.: They did.

A. P. *(after a pause)*: I can't seem to sleep more than two or three hours at a time lately.

A.P. drops a bundle onto N.'s lap. N. unwraps it, reads.

N.: The New Testament and The Psalms. *(Nervously, in a whisper)* What's this for? It's forbidden.

A. P. *(also whispering, interrupts him)*: Yeah, yeah, I know, you're not a believer. Neither am I. Check Matthew, Chapter 6—a prayer. It helped me. And then do as you wish. *(Covers himself up with an old shearling coat)*

N. *(whispers again)*: I don't understand.

WRITINGS FROM ISOLATION

A. P. (*speaks from under the coat, muffled*): It's like I said: I found it helpful. I read it when I was thinking about my wife. But you do as you wish.

N. (*squeezes his eyes shut, covers them with his palm, then puts the book into his pocket*): I'm not going to read it. Do you hear me?

He gets no answer, and after a while falls asleep.

ACT 2

A narrow storage room. N. is standing directly under the dull ceiling light. He keeps glancing at the door.

N. *(wipes sweat off his forehead, still glancing at the door):* This is insane.

N. *pulls out the book and leafs through it. Then he notices a note penciled in the margin.*

N. "The time is near!" *(He finds the line and begins to read.)* Our Father, who art in Heaven...

The figure of Christ appears in the room. N. stops, looks at him in silence, then shuts the Bible, but continues to hold it in his hand.

N. *(looking at Christ, calmly):* So, this is what the pearly gates look like? Did you see the giant brown gates at the entrance to this camp? I noticed them as soon as we were brought here. I remember thinking that there seemed to be something special about them. *(Studies Christ's face carefully)* You know, I could swear your face looks familiar. I know I have seen you before, I just can't remember where. *(He remembers suddenly and is surprised.)* Good Lord... Of course... You're the man from my dream that started it all. *(Covers his eyes with his palm)* I dreamt that I was running through a forest and some kind of

creature was chasing me. I can't see its face or make out its shape: it's like a shadow, but it's clear it's armed with a bow and arrows. (*Removes his palm from his face*) Suddenly, a man runs out to meet me. An arrow strikes him, he falls on the ground, and dies. This happens twice. Finally, I reach a field of wheat. It's tall, high enough to reach my chest. And you know what's eerie about it? There isn't a breath of wind: everything is still, unmoving, as if it were painted. And in the middle of the field, there's a large carved wooden structure, a wooden tower house, like in the olden days. I step into the yard, and there's a table there waiting for me, with a pitcher of milk, farmer cheese, and—what's really weird—four glasses, but ones from our times, Soviet ones. A man walks out of the house. It's... you. (*Slowly, remembering*) Except you were dressed in all white and barefoot, and a woman walked out after you, also dressed in white and barefoot, and a little old man with a belt and staff. You sat down at the table and said, "We've been waiting for you for a long time." And everything after that is a fog, I don't remember anything else, what we spoke about... But when I was about to leave the yard, later already, you suddenly said, "Go and don't be afraid. The Lord is with you." And that's when I woke up. For a long time after that, I had this strange feeling—like a small child when his mother picks him up—of being so small and so protected, and utterly at peace. It's even stranger because I don't believe in god. I told my mother about the dream and she said, "It means that the good Lord will save you three times." I did have brushes with death in 2014 and 2017. (*Grins*) Maybe I'll

get away now, too. (*Becomes more animated*) The next day I met Ira. I had that same feeling, though I had forgotten all about that dream by then. I always felt so good and so at peace when I was with her. (*Distracted, looking into Christ's eyes*) You know, it's been five years since I've seen her. Sometimes I think that if I could only have her stroke my cheek again, just once, I could die. I don't need anything else—just for her to stroke my cheek. (*Becomes animated again*) That day, she and I sat in the library until nightfall. She said that Moscow autumns had a special kind of darkness, and I asked if I could walk her home. It was the happiest autumn of my life. Yes, we were happy. And things just sort of kept lining up after that: my comrades, the Party, Anton Palych... (*Leans close to Christ and whispers*) They even told me to start studying English. (*Back in a normal voice*) And I'm sure you know what that means these days. Ira was just about to graduate. Life seemed as plain as a copper coin: just live, work, and love your motherland—what could be simpler? Until one day Anton Palych whispered in my ear. "The Cheka received an anonymous report about you," he said. (*Turns away from Christ for a moment, then faces him again and approaches*) Do you know what was on my mind then? You wouldn't believe me. I thought about clementines. (*Smiles*) Clementines. It was New Year's Eve. Ira had given me this huge scarf she had knit as a gift, and there was a bowl of clementines on the table. The instant he said that to me, everything turned black and white, except for the clementines: they just grew brighter. They glowed like coals in a stove. I didn't even respond to him.

I just went back to the table, picked up a clementine, and began peeling it. I still remember the way it smelled... Everyone's faces, the objects around us—it's all faded, but the smell is right here with me. Ira was smiling at me, and I was smiling at her, and then she reached over, stretched like this over the table, kissed me on the tip of my nose, and laughed. She had this pleasant laugh, light as spring. A single anonymous report can't cross out all that, can it? (*As if coming back to reality*) Now I know it was all a kind of madness, a spell that had come over me, that I no longer had that room, that night, my life, Ira... (*Slowly, syllable by syllable*) I had not-a-thing. You know, after all of that my life started to feel to me like a walk down this endless road and, in the end, I would see a stone that I had passed before. Well, that's waxing lyrical. (*Growing animated again, directly at Christ*) And Anton Palych... He was the one who warned me and even promised to help me get abroad (*smiles nervously*), and I turned him in to the powers that be. (*Covers his face with his hands, laughs hysterically, then grows calm again, looks at Christ with reproach*) Do you understand me? No, you would never understand. Yes, I'm innocent. But what if he had warned someone that was guilty or was an undercover provocateur? You didn't see the way he looked at Ira. He couldn't take his eyes off her. One time I didn't sleep all night. I just lay there looking at her. I looked at her. Who and on what scales weighed her kiss, her hand, that autumn in Moscow? You say nothing. And now they want to erase it all with one crappy piece of paper? No way. That's why I went in myself, "Here I am, comrades,"

I said. "I've come here myself, I have nowhere to run to and am not going to. Sort this all out." They were shocked: "How did you find out?" (*Nods*) Yes, I knew, of course. I knew that they were going to ask me, and that they would go after Anton Palych and his wife. I knew that. They took Ira, too. (*Falls silent for a moment*) So you could say that I also went to the cross willingly. No, I'm lying there. (*Nods*) I am. At first, I denied everything. I protested, even endured torture. I thought I could prove my loyalty. And then... then I suddenly got it—all of it, all at once. What did it matter if I was innocent or guilty? It's wrong to even ask that question. You, of all people, should know that. I understood it when they dragged me to the basement again. There was this one guy who had been working on me for a few weeks already, but that time I saw him differently. I saw his sharp eyebrows—they looked like an eagle's wings—his pointed nose, his thinpressed lips, his gaze that cut like a knife. He barely even blinked, just warmed up his wrist. I looked at him, and I finally understood: he would never believe anything I said to him. He wouldn't believe it if Comrade Stalin himself had come into that room and said, "Let this one go." And he would be right. He would be a thousand, a million times right. I probably wouldn't leave that room myself either. Everyone wanders in his own desert, right? What am I compared to the whole country? Again, you say nothing. Yes, I had been convicted unjustly. And still, it was the right thing to do: others, the guilty ones, will have more fear. Fear is the glue of the people. Think about it—just think! A country that takes its most loyal and most

committed people, and drags them through basements and camps, then hangs them up on hooks and iron bars—can you imagine what it would do to its actual enemies? Look at the Germans: they're burning books and there's joy in their eyes. What did their Führer, that skinny illiterate neurotic, give them? He gave them fire, and he became their Prometheus. And I swear to you, they would burn his *Mein Kampf* if he told them to. I wasn't joking about those gates—remember? If we're building this country—without borders or nations, without beggars or prisons, a country of free and equal people—maybe the entrance is somewhere here? And the gates are part of it? Maybe you just have to trust, believe blindly, close your eyes and run through that forest? And then we'll be rewarded with a Kingdom of Heaven spanning from Moscow to Kamchatka? But is there anyone not content in heaven? How many people here are really enemies? What use are rabble-rousers? Starving beggars? They scream about how bad things are for them and are just elated to be able to voice it. Isn't it better to just shut them down? Put a hundred in jail, or two, or three—for the peace of a thousand? That's why I refuse to be a victim, an extra in the freedom play, whose portrait will flash behind bars on a poster. I put nails into my hands myself. I did it. Just like you did, come to think of it. We are both suicidal, and you have to admit it. But how can one look at you and contemplate what's unjust? Millions believe it could not have been otherwise. *(Raises his voice)* Isn't that so? *(Almost screams)* Tell me it isn't so! They just don't get that her scarf is more precious to me than all of this nonsense!

CHRIST IN A GULAG

Falls to his knees before Christ, his arms limp at his sides. Christ strokes his cheek. N. squeezes his eyes shut. Christ disappears. A guard and A. P. burst into the storage room.

A. P. *(from behind the guard's shoulder):* There, there he is!

Guard: You bitch, did you go all churchy on me?

N. *(lost):* Ira...

The guard kicks N. in the head. He falls and hits his head against the storage shelf. Blood covers his face. N. dies.

NAMED AFTER VLADIMIR LENIN

"Friendship" and "Youth," "Thought" and "Truth": My mom seemed unable to understand why this small comprehensible world had to collapse one day. For her, the USSR was an intimate thing that fit into the tiny garden outside an old window. For as long as I can recall, my mother always spoke of the Soviet Union with a smile, reminiscing about things that couldn't have been more distant from Marxism and the Bolsheviks. Grandpa Lenin shone on the wall of a movie theater, dwelled in New Year's greeting cards, and inhabited the smell of clementines and the candy the whole family strung on the holiday tree. He was the tasty chocolate ice cream named—with a tinge of lyrical sadness but without excess—Chestnut. Even when he loomed in the guise of a giant stone statue, the man in the suit jacket only summoned a beautiful red balloon from the fog of the past that Mom used to carry as a child beside her father at a May Day parade. The All-Union Communist Party of the

Bolsheviks obediently distilled itself into fountain soda sold for four kopeks a glass and Marxist dogmas spun into Mom's favorite cream-colored raincoat. Dzerzhinsk, Budenovka, and Kirovsk held all sorts of significance, except for the names of the "founding fathers"—Feliks Dzerzhinskii, Semen Budenyi, and Sergei Kirov—whom they were supposed to immortalize: one of these places featured a park shaded by old acacia trees, another was a reliable source of tasty kefir at a bargain price. There is much habit in a life that is all about tapping in the dark, but move those same objects around, and you'll see the same space completely differently.

That's precisely what happened to my mom. One day she opened her eyes and found herself half a dozen miles from her native Donetsk, and at an immeasurable distance from the red flags. The clementines had vanished. The noise and laughter of the old house had become an apartment with no hot water in a concrete-slab high-rise. It wasn't the Union that was disappearing, nor the bologna sausage for two rubles twenty kopeks—old photos in her albums had lost their color and were beginning to fade. Her eyes feverishly searched for the past, only to trip up on a gigantic concrete sign: Tall red letters spelled out "Coal mine named after Lenin." Somewhere here the horizon sparkled. The gray asphalt led through an open-air depot to the guarded gate of an old coal mine, once topped with a lit-up red star. Whenever I'd ride past the concrete sign with Lenin's name in red letters, I felt like the whole city was shuffling to that gate, as if into the maw of an iron monster. Every shift change

was a liturgy, and the star had replaced the crucifix. The extinguished beacon of a vanished world made people check the box next to the Communist Party on their election bulletins and reminisce about how cheap natural gas once was. The coal mine named after Lenin and clemences—I don't think Mom ever understood why that entire world collapsed.

The entire city didn't understand either. Makiivka entered this war as a Soviet town, to fight for Soviet things, because it had remained Soviet despite its twenty-five years under the yellow-and-blue Ukrainian flag. But what about us? We were different. The generation of men that would soon try on a new flag of an invented republic was shapeless: they had inherited only the mine and still had to find their guiding star. That's why they keep trading the Republic's three-colored flag for an icon of Christ, or for the pennant of Russian monarchy, or for the old Soviet victory banner.

SOMETHING ABOUT SOMEONE

I have always been afraid of pronouns. “He,” “those,” and “they” dissolve individuals, converting them into statistics. Nevertheless, even after I had left Pronoun City, I knew that I couldn’t very well write about myself without using any: Makiivka was faceless and at the same time represented my self-portrait. In the middle of the city, there was a lonely cluster of about a dozen old houses, whose windows and shutters caught the dust and waste fumes from the Makiivka Metallurgical Plant. No one had lived there for a long time, and the houses were merely referred to as belonging to “someone.” They resembled a homeless man stretched out for a nap in the middle of a pedestrian avenue, who had spent sixty years asleep. Existence through pronouns had slipped into the language of trendy newspapers, magazines, and TV shows: *Elle*, *He and She*, and *His Style*. “Someone” was particularly frightening: it encompassed everything at once and nothing at all. Since childhood, I had been afraid of being referred to as “he” one day: that would have made me a part of the silence. An attentive observer, however,

will notice that language is both the disease and the cure. But I was afraid to observe, afraid to see, so I began to write—fiction became my answer to the peeling shutters. They didn't disappear, of course, but if I could make them into a painting, then all I had to do was sign at the bottom, even if the painting was a bunch of ugly spots. That's how I began to write short stories and plays in which the word "he" peeked out nervously from every line—and you couldn't even say that much about some of them.

HEROES OF THE TOCSIN

He listened carefully. In the half-dark illuminated by a dull lamp, he could hear a distant ringing. The sound came closer and closer, seeped through the cracks in the window, slowly crawled up the walls with their shreds of wallpaper and, finally, like a bore, entered his body. Another peal. He suddenly pictured a pair of monks on the summit of a huge mountain: as if in slow motion, they were swinging a log wrapped in rope against a copper cylinder. Another bang.

“An artillery barrage,” he finally recognized. He had grown so unaccustomed to frontline reports and the sound of explosions and, instead, grown so used to the smell of mold and damp that the barrage registered in his mind like a distant alarm rung by a giant bell, a tocsin. For the last couple of months, his only concern had been his own survival as he migrated from one basement to another, and he had completely forgotten that outside these walls the war continued, just as it had before. The next moment surprised him: he could barely recall who was fighting whom and was completely at a loss when he

tried to remember what they were fighting for. He was amazed. He had utterly forgotten that the locks and the bars on his window, and the artillery barrage—they were the sum total of his life. They were why he had been imprisoned, why he had lost his freedom—and there he was, staring at the window, uncomprehending, like a child.

In the flickering light of the dull lamp, he pulled up his blanket and again pictured the copper cylinder atop a tall, tall mountain.

TO A FUTURE ME

| f someone had shown me, yet unborn, something from my future life...

So, I open my eyes and see a blank painted wall, a corner of an iron frame with a photograph of a beautiful woman attached, and just a bit above it—a vial of yellow liquid. What would I think of this from the distance of my yet-unlived twenty-eight years? I bet the yet-unborn me somewhere in heaven would scratch his chin and ask god to flip a few more cards. To which the good Lord would say, “Your life is going to be so unimaginable and terrible that no one is going to believe the truth of it. Is it worth even getting started?”

I study the photograph: luxurious chestnut hair falls over the woman’s delicate shoulders, her lips are scarlet red, her face a touch pale. I can’t hear any shrieks or torture behind this photograph—all I get is the calm tender gaze of her eyes. Only the vial of medicine prompts me to think that god has already made a plan. I clap him on the shoulder and bravely take the leap down.

THE BELL

After returning from the front, he realized that he was losing his talent. His talent as a writer, to which he had attached so many hopes, was slipping away. Writing, like boxing, required constant training, and he was completely out of shape after being held captive. His young eyes stared at blank sheets of paper, and he couldn't put down a single line—despite having seen enough pain and grief to fill a novel.

That wasn't his only problem, though. For the entire time that he was held as a prisoner of war, he had felt as though a giant bell was hanging over him—as if tons of metal were vibrating above his head. He looked at the world through a thin slice of light that, on sunny days, slipped under the rim of the giant iron thing above him. Shadows flitted around him, and he was surrounded by the reverberating ringing of the bell.

Being freed had broken down the bars on his windows, but the bell hadn't gone anywhere: instead of being the size of his narrow cell, it had now grown to the size of

the entire country. Now it was the quiet around him that stunned him. After the explosions and the tanks, and the banging of a rifle butt against an iron door, the ordinary city noise sounded to him flat as the sound of a graveyard. Every day he expected to hear a bang against tons of metal and sometimes ducked while walking down the street where he had grown up, much to the amusement of the neighborhood children. Work could distract him, but not for long. His mind was completely possessed by the mystery of the ringing that rippled out, like a circle on the water, through the souls of hundreds of people like him. At night, when he kissed the warm lips of the woman he had been dreaming about for so long, he didn't dare do anything more so as not to betray himself. If she looked into his eyes, she might think he no longer loved her or was thinking about another woman, but that wouldn't be the truth. He loved her, even more, stronger than before, but the bell meant that he was alone in a way he could not share with her. His eyes that had once sparkled so brightly were fogged over, and the thing he most feared hearing was that he was being understood.

One day in the store where he worked shelving goods, the manager found him frozen with a can of corn in his hand: he just stood there and stared into the space before him. Only god knows how long he had been like that—he certainly couldn't tell you himself—before the manager called out to him. “Hey there,” he said, gently pulling the can from his hand and speaking in a voice one uses with a volatile, disturbed person that could easily take offense. “You might be a hero and all, but you're no good at shelving corn today. Why don't you go home.”

Losing his job didn't bother him; he was about to quit anyway. As he wandered the city aimlessly, he walked into a suburban neighborhood of private homes. The small cottages, their tidy green lawns, and the night sky full of glittering stars dazed him. This was the instrument he had forgotten how to play, and only distant noises reminded him of the music he had once heard and could no longer comprehend.

—Where are the walls that hold me inside and the bars that section off the sky? Where is the monstrous concrete smokestack rising behind the gray fence? It rises triumphant, as if there were nothing else left of this world except the wind, the cold walls, and the smokestack itself. Is the smoke that comes out of it not a belch of hell, and are these landscapes not those of the underworld? Where is your might, you, heavy dull lights in rusted frames? How many men have you watched put a noose around their necks in your low light? Who can tell how a drop of despair becomes a wave—and carries away, through the coal coke fire, the souls of those who couldn't find it in them to wait for freedom? How bitter must it be to perish, staring at this smokestack through the bars on the window? But you, thick walls, and you, rusty bars, do not know the secret that is higher than this smokestack: freedom comes when everything else is taken away. The freedom of death—the one beyond your power. It laughs at you in the silence of this night, louder and harder as the lights grow dimmer. The right to die is not given by God: it pours onto us with the smoke out of this very smokestack.

Such were his thoughts while he stood, unaware of time, for more than an hour near a small church, whose stone steeple gently pierced the night.

All at once, he came back to his senses, leaped over a low fence, and stopped under a tree whose branches brushed the roof of the narthex. He clambered up the branches and from there slipped onto the roof of the church, feeling strange all the while, as if he had found what he had been looking for for a long time. A few more agile moves and he had entered the belfry, looking down at the city that drowns in hundreds of bright lights. Suddenly, only for an instant, he thought he was looking not at the tidy cottages, but at their ruins with thin plumes of white smoke rising here and there. In the same instant, he felt the urge to leap, head-first, but some force made him look up, and he saw what he had come there to see. Above him was the bell, no bigger than three feet in diameter, with a rope hanging down from it as if from a void. The bell looked nothing like the giant thing that had been tormenting him for months, and still his body trembled slightly. He grabbed the rope and began to ring the bell wildly. He ripped at it with all his strength, with everything his tortured mind was capable of and, for the first time in many years, a smile touched his face. Oh, it was happiness. He was happy as soon as he felt that the ringing of loneliness had vanished. He thought of the woman from whom he had fled so foolishly earlier that day and knew that they were together, the two of them: he was no longer alone.

Doors opened in the homes below him, and people came out onto the street that had been dozing so peacefully. Some pointed at him, others just grumbled under their breath.

He dropped the rope and squeezed his eyes shut, but not until after he saw the flashing lights of a police car speeding toward him on this, his first night of peace.

OF PIPES AND MEN

Old broken windows, metal rebar, and rust-stained concrete whipped by the snowstorm—that was the winter landscape of the Isolation facility as seen from the exercise yard. But I have a different image in my mind. As a child, I was often sick, and my mom would have to take me to the local clinic—a two-story building with a roof of artificial slate, whose broken-off shards, covered with moss, littered the ground around it. For whatever reason, my memory is fixed on the pipe that stuck out of the clinic's wall and always dripped a thin stream of water onto the bricks green with mold. The place was especially gloomy in the fall. Above the pipe were the windows of the lab, and as soon as the door would open, an acidic waft of urine and rubbing alcohol would hit you in the face. Just picture the cold Makiivka winds that got through no matter how many layers of clothing you were wearing, the autumnal sky, and that pipe that dripped even in winter, when gray half-melted ice covered

the bricks. My mom is holding my hand. I'm swaddled in a scarf up to my ears, and next to us are walking "the unfortunate people," as I used to think of them. Some are on crutches, and one or two are in wheelchairs. It was just an ordinary picture you'd see around a clinic, except that the pipe made the people in it "unfortunate": there was so much sorrow and death emanating from it that the poor souls' insistence on getting better seemed, to a child, a mocking grin of fate. Why would anyone want to restore to life anyone leading such a gray existence? I burrowed deeper into the knitting around my face—not from the cold, but from the pipe's accursed stare.

A completely different picture unfolded before me whenever we went to Maiske, a tiny village in Crimea that seemed to be lit with god's own brightest lantern, it was so warm and peaceful there. Miracles would begin occurring as soon as we crossed the lagoons of the Syvash that separate the peninsula from the mainland. I used to beg Mom to wake me up as soon as we crossed, so that I wouldn't miss our entrance into a different world: buckets of fruit, blooming fields of poppy, and hot bread straight from the oven that my brother and I ate with fresh strawberries. I scanned the horizon hungrily for the first glimmer of the sea—to see it was akin to receiving Holy Communion. God was unnecessary: he was everywhere here. The gray bristly city faded behind us, and we walked on the burning flowers of Crimean life.

Now I look at a gutter amid concrete ruins and think that that old pipe must be somewhere here as well. The actual pipe, of course, is still sticking out of the

wall of the clinic where I spent my childhood. And yet I can see it here, in this rabble, beyond the barbed wire and the decrepit chestnut tree. It has stretched between us—somewhere beyond politics, environment, and circumstance—and the war has been merely a bridge between the landscapes of my childhood and the present, which is gray, as war is supposed to be.

AN ESSAY ABOUT A VOLCANO

P icture a massive, extinguished volcano. A man, completely alone, climbs out of its dark mouth. Before him lie hundreds of taciturn stones, perhaps some rusty dust, and, above him, the sky hangs low. This was the picture a university professor once summoned in our minds before linking it with a single concept, the one I'll talk about here—philosophy.

No science, in all its history, can point to such a profound failure as the one that eventually caught up with philosophy: two and a half millennia of Western thought still hasn't resolved any of the problems philosophy set out to address. What's more, within the field itself this state of affairs is considered all but ideal: philosophy, it is believed, needs only to hint vaguely at an answer and let the reader write their own conclusion. It's as if we were staring all the time at two blank sheets of paper, and philosophy was more like the Japanese haiku than any other scholarly discipline. Strictly speaking, it

isn't a discipline because it doesn't have a common field of study that is uniformly understood by all the participants in the "philosophy game." What's more, the essence of the game is that, once started, it can never be finished—and this is, in fact, something that all the players agree upon. My own situation—the condition of writing these lines behind prison bars, on top of a window that's been painted over—illustrates this notion well. So then, what is philosophy? And is not a thinker also a poet that finds civilization, to paraphrase Brodsky, more accessible than a bottle of wine?

I didn't choose the vision of a deserted crater at random. A man climbs out onto its rim utterly alone. And that is the first distinction between philosophy and everything else. Religion, law, and science all offer ready-made answers, and the man just has to nod. In philosophy, man is doomed to make his choices without any hints or guidance from above. In this sense, being alone is a precondition for any thought at all. It's the existential magic lantern that makes the silhouette of the man visible. But what is thought itself? Heidegger wrote that we begin to think only when submerged in the element of thinking, just as we can only learn to swim if we enter the water. Amazingly, he answered the question just by asking, "What is thinking?" In the same vein, Evald Ilyenkov was right when he wrote that an orthodox Hegelian could picture god as a middle-aged man reading *Science of Logic* by candlelight and journeying from existence to essence and from essence to comprehension. Despite the comprehensive and sophisticated nature of the German

classics, something external is necessary to make their systems possible. When Habermas finds this “something” in communicative action, is he not just bottling the same water into a new vessel? Thought—and with it, man—finds itself in language. In this sense, language is where existence dwells. But language only manifests itself in communication, and that’s why philosophy is a style of talking that begins with a formula and ends with dew on grass.

I think of that volcano often. Where does the man that had dared to undertake the climb go? Obviously, up there at the summit, heaven awaits, but heavens can be different. Perhaps it’s bright and clear blue. Or perhaps there are gray storm clouds spewing lightning onto the people-less plain, and it’s much more comfortable to be at the bottom than at the top. Millions have stayed down at the bottom. Hundreds continue their trek in the desert because they choose, every day, that distant and unclear summit.

AN ATHEIST'S PRAYER

D ear Lord, grant that I not be indifferent.

*Written in quarantine at
Penal Colony No. 32, after Isolation.*

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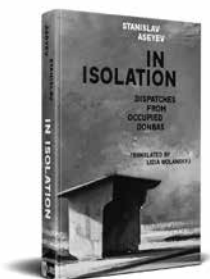
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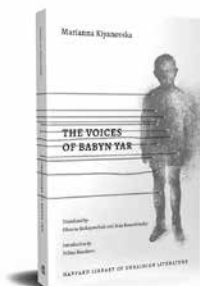
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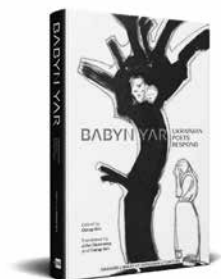
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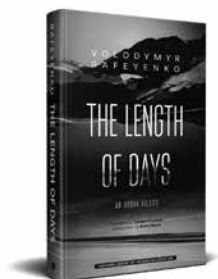
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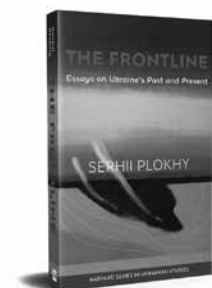
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