



Chapter 11. Part One. Inside.

Well, anyway, life goes on. Everyone seems to be healthy around me, no one is dying.

“My name is Vasilij.”

Seven men state their foreign-sounding names, and I don't remember any of them. Making mistakes, they try to pronounce my name.

A shower would be good. I've eaten virtually nothing for 5 days, and instead of taking a shower I've poured water over myself from a bottle. The toilet, which is also the shower, is a small square about five feet wide and six feet long surrounded by a low wall. The walls and the floor are covered with brown tiles. An Indian toilet is an astonishing thing. Despite the dirt everywhere in the houses of the Indians, their toilets remain the tidiest place. This prison cell is my new home now, and this is my toilet. A clean toilet is a relative concept. Of course, this toilet is much tidier than the one in the previous jail, where no one seemed to have cleaned it for ages; and it is spotlessly clean compared to any public restroom back in Russia. But it is of course not a home toilet with white marble tiles. Since footwear is left outside the cell, I can only hope that my immune system will not let fungus colonize my feet. There is a bucket of water near the hole in the floor. A tap hangs from the wall, with water dripping from a piece of wet, slippery cloth at the end of it. Apparently, this serves as flush, sink, shower, bidet, and drinking water at the same time. Judging by the bagginess of my clothes, I must have lost around 10 pounds. When I get undressed, I notice that my whole body is covered in red scratched mosquito bites. Thank God I haven't caught the malaria these little bloodsuckers carry. Alright, it is not that bad, the conditions are bearable; it could be much worse. I can handle three months easily, and then someone should get me out of here. After having a shower and changing, I sit on the floor; this is my place now. Thank God I don't have to fight for it. I can see a chessboard in the corner of the cell. It will be easier to kill time with chess. “To kill time,” it sounds so horrible. This is my lifetime, and someone took it away from me. A lifetime is not that long and the Lord only knows when it will come to an end. It is hard to imagine that several months of my life will be taken away from me. And it will only be several months, provided that my friends and relatives get me out of here. What if it's ten or twenty years? No, I'd rather not think about that; it can't be possible. Money should do its job in this country, since it is the most corrupt in the world. Half a year at the most and I'll be out of here. I wonder what the other inmates do to kill the time. There is some Indian show on TV. Some are watching it, some are reading the newspaper. I need to think of something to do for the next few months. I don't want to waste them. As I have the chance, I need to spend this time on myself. Tomorrow the doctor should take the stitches out of my arm. I will start doing sports, and learning English and Hindi. These things should come in useful in my life. Books and chess I will keep for my spare time. I have to make a schedule for myself and keep busy so that I don't get a chance to think of anything stupid.

“Hey, Russian,” a strong skinny Indian addresses me. He is wearing a T-shirt with the arched lettering of the ‘Adidas’ brand on it. “We read in a newspaper about you. You are here for twenty grams of MDMA and cultivating marijuana. As for me, I robbed a petrol station, but they should release me on bail soon. You got unlucky with the quantity, if it was ten grams you could get out of here soon, too. But do not get upset about it, you won't be bored here. My name is Dominic. Do you see that man with long hair in the cell opposite us? He is Russian, too.”

“Russian??!”

It is good that he's Russian, it will be much more fun together.

“His name is Viktor and he has been here for three months. He's here for drugs, too.”

“Oh, I know him. There was a Russian guy called Vitka, also known by the nickname Dusya.”

He was said to be in jail, but I thought he'd already been released. He turned up in Goa a few months ago. Sometimes I met him at parties, usually once or twice a month. I wasn't interested in where he lived or what he did. He was one of those people who considered themselves psychedelic gurus without having read a single book about psychedelics. The last time I saw him was in East End, the only trance club that survived the repressions. It happened just three months ago. He looked like an old crazy Russian in his late fifties. Without any suntan, round-shouldered, with a sagging belly, he wandered around the party giving away cheap amphetamine from the pharmacy, mixed with tooth anesthetic. He proudly called his powder 'my cocaine' or 'magic powder.'

"Viktor!" I yell across the platform separating our cells. Somebody dressed in a lungi approaches the barred door. His body is suntanned and lean.

"Vasya, is that you?" he replies laughing and reaching his hand toward me. "We read about you in a newspaper just a week ago. What brings you here?"

"They want me to serve ten years," I answer, having recognized his voice, happy that I'm not alone in here.

"Don't shit your pants, they want everyone to serve ten years here."

"Thanks, that sounds comforting. How are you doing in here?"

"Not bad, it is like a health resort. Let's talk tomorrow during walking time; I can't hear you well enough now. Besides, I am busy at the moment, I'm doing yoga, sorry."

"Khana agya³, khana agya," suddenly these weird, unknown words begin to be chanted by all the inmates, while they hastily take their plates and mugs out of the pile of dishes.

Chapter 11. Part Two. Outside.

"Khana agya, khana agya, tea, tea, tea, omelet-cutlet, cutlet-omelet," various food hawkers cry, trying to shout each other.

"The train is approaching Bombay, we should eat something," Yair tells me, sleepily rubbing his eyes. "Today, when we arrive, we need to get to another station. It is at the other end of Bombay. If we are lucky and buy tickets for today, tomorrow we will be in Goa."

"Oh, the sooner the better; I'm tired of travelling, I want the sea." I reply, looking at the unusual types of food in the hands of the passing merchants.

"What's the matter with you, Russian? Why have you gone sour? How can you get tired of a journey? Especially when the adventure is only just beginning. It is unlikely that we will be able to buy tickets on the train today. The whole of India reserves tickets during the peak season two months in advance. There are more chances to buy tickets for the bus than the train."

"Well, then maybe we should go immediately to the bus station? It is alright for you, you still have half a year to travel. But I have only a week left and I'd like to see Goa."

"You'll see it eventually; but now we need to eat, we don't know when we'll get a chance again."

3 The food is coming (Hindi).

Having paid a young food peddler thirty rupees, I receive a plate of rice, a chicken drumstick covered with pea sauce, two flatbreads and a plastic bag with drinking water. A crippled cleaner, crawling on the floor of the car, stops sweeping the floor and watches hungrily as I try to open the tray of food. At intervals of several minutes, different kinds of cripple crawl past me on the floor. The majority of them are children *of seven to ten years of age*. Some do not have eyes, some can't walk, but all of them have something resembling a broom in their hands. Crawling on the dirty floor of the car, they sweep up the dust and beg for money. Having tried to eat, I realize that only the rice and flatbreads are edible for me. From the chicken and gravy my mouth burns and tears flow. Although I have already been in India for a week, I have a great deal of difficulty *eating the local food*: burning chili peppers are a major component of any dish. On an Indian diet I have managed to lose ten pounds. Having bought myself so-called "fishermen"⁴ pants and a simple Indian shirt for three dollars in Pushkar, I look like a typical traveler in India. We used my expensive, fashionable clothes for rags to clean the chillum after smoking. Deciding to throw away my half-eaten plate of rice and chicken, I stand up and head towards the end of our car. A boy with mutilated legs who has been watching me carefully, immediately crawls after me, quickly moving his hands across the floor, trying to get ahead of another boy – another beggar – who was cleaning a few meters away from me.

"God, how horrible."

Until now, I have never given anyone my uneaten food. Is it really possible that desperate hungry children are ready to crawl on the floor to finish someone else's food? No, I'd rather throw away my leftovers, and give them some change so that they can buy a normal meal. At the end of the car, I notice another couple of beggars, who, seeing the uneaten food on the plate, immediately rush to my side. One of them, having noticed that I was going to throw away my almost untouched food, grabs the plate with his little hands, and abruptly pulls it towards him. However, the plate does not move because on the other side two pairs of small hands are already pulling the food to their side. Releasing the plate, I barely have time to jump out of the way. The food is instantly scattered all over the floor and the walls of the car. The children crawl around the dirty, spit-covered car, eating the leftovers of my meal straight from the floor. Shocked, I return to my seat and stare out of the window, trying to divert my thoughts from the intense sense of guilt at seeing these little cripples.

For some reason I feel guilty that I sometimes complain about the injustice of fate, that I whine about the things that I feel I lack. Would these little kids ever understand me, if I told them about my problems? Not having the latest model cell phone and a mink coat for my wife, the need to constantly repair my old jeep, or the roof that leaks in my two-bedroom apartment in the spring. These problems, which seem illusory now yet at times make me depressed, would seem ridiculous to these children. Where is the magical India that Roerich drew? Endless piles of garbage and slums float past the window. The slums of Bombay begin a few hours before the entrance to the city. Small houses made of cardboard, sticks, stones, cow dung and other debris start to stretch along the tracks. The first thing that catches your eye is the hundreds of slum dwellers quietly squatting and defecating along the railway tracks. Having no qualms about doing such an intimate act in public, they look curiously at people in the windows of passing trains. Some manage to brush their teeth at the same time, or quietly talk to a neighbor while the latter is washing his ass with a plastic bottle. Despite the lack of a personal toilet, almost everyone has a happy, cheerful face. Why do we, who have all of the possible benefits of civilization, constantly live under the yoke of a lack of things, which are in fact useless? A little cripple crawling down the aisle of the car smiles at me, thanking me for my unfinished food. I would like advise all those gloomy people who commute to work in the morning to learn how to enjoy life from this little cripple.