



Chapter 20. Part One. Inside.

A fortnight flies by like a day. Time seems to stop in jail. Every two weeks, the drug police come for me and take me to court. The court procedure usually takes less than two minutes. An elderly woman in a judicial robe worn over a sari looks up for a moment to ask only one question “Any complaints?” And you cannot complain, otherwise you can be transferred to a more restrictive jail. Today, I am taken to court in a small police jeep. Outside, it is pouring with rain. Indian cats scratch my soul with their sharp claws. My heart is pounding in the hope that this will be my last court appearance. Today the judge will decide whether to release me on bail or not. Again the same painfully familiar, shabby defendant’s bench, and rusty fans overhead. Since I was first brought to the court, the yellow acacia outside has had time to blossom.

Today is my last chance to get out of here. Life goes on outside behind the barred window. People go about their business in a leisurely manner without considering the fact that they have freedom. They do not feel its value, they just have it. They can go wherever they want and do whatever they want. Somewhere outside, far away, are my girls. My daughter still doesn’t know that I’m in here. How I would love to get out today, so that she never finds out that her father was in prison. The damp air smells of flowers and spices.

“Any complaints?” the judge asks without looking up at me.

“No, no complaints,” I answer with bated breath.

“The application for bail is refused. The next trial is in two weeks.”

Something cracks with a crunch in my heart. There is no more chance of getting out before the results of the expert analysis are received. For a whole month I had been hoping for a miracle, but it slipped away from me. No one has received the analysis earlier than in eight months.

The road to prison floats by, as if in a fog. I’m in the cell once again. There is absolutely nothing I want to do. Opening the English dictionary, I find a new word ideally suited to my state. “Frustration” – the derangement of plans and the destruction of hope.

Pramud yells from the next cell like a madman: “I’ll get out and fuck her, I’ll kill her, I want to fuck that nurse,” the Indian, imprisoned for eleven grams of MDMA, shouts frantically.

He has already been waiting for his expert analysis for eight months. “He’s probably gone completely nuts,” I think, imagining myself in his shoes. I ought to pull myself together. I still need my judgment. Behind the jail walls, the Sun is setting. I have no desire to eat. My life force seems to have left me. By evening, I start to feel a light fever. Water drips from the tiled roof onto my bed in several places. From the window, gusts of cold wind envelop me. I gradually start to shake. I have no dry clothing at all. The whole cell smells of mold. I wrap myself in everything I have. My bones start to ache; it’s almost impossible to lie still. I’m burning up. Please, anything but malaria. I can’t be sick; I have a lot of unfinished business. Outside, my girls are waiting for me; they need me. I need to pull myself together and overcome this encroaching illness. Come on, protective neuropeptide system¹, turn on! Help me out; cure me, please! It is impossible to sleep. Time drags on and it seems that the night will never end. Morning finally comes. I have no strength to resist the illness and my body aches. I lie in a fetal position, wrapped in a wet blanket and various rags. All of my clothes are soaked through. At sunrise, I get a little better.

“Our Russian looks very bad,” I hear Dominic’s voice.

¹ *Neuropeptides* – biologically active compounds that are synthesized by nerve cells. They are involved in the regulation of the metabolism, affect the immune processes, and play an important role in the mechanisms of memory, learning, sleep, etc.

“He should be sent to the hospital,” my neighbor Mudra hands me a cup of hot tea.

“Hey, guards, foreigner is dying,” my cellmates bang on the bars. “This Russian looks very bad, take him to hospital or he dies here.”

“Get dressed, you’ll be taken to the hospital now,” Disay tells me, giving me his dry shirt. “Grab your dictionary, you’ll explain the doctor that you have a fever and the shakes.”

I am accompanied by two security guards from the jail and put in an empty prison bus to travel to the Azilo state hospital.

“His body temperature is one hundred and four degrees, you will have to leave him here,” a nurse explains to my guards.

I wonder how much is it in Celsius...

The Azilo hospital resembles a clinic for the homeless. Shabby, moldy walls, barred windows, old dilapidated equipment. A free hospital for the poorest Indians. In the hospital ward there are three old medical couches, partially covered with dried bloodstains. Someone screams in pain, someone else moans, in the hallway there is a huge queue. Almost all of the patients look like the inhabitants of Bombay slums. In frayed simple clothes, many of them have come for help barefoot. I am given a green hospital gown, smelling of bleach. Hundreds of disposable gloves, washed and yellowed from time, dry on a rope stretched across the corridor. I am led to a huge ward with fifty beds. People taking care of their sick relatives look curiously at the strange man who has appeared here for no discernable reason. Groans are heard from different beds. Someone screams as if in death throes. Next to almost every patient are relatives or friends. It smells of urine and medicine. On the neighboring bed, an old man lies connected to a drip. He looks like a prisoner from the Auschwitz concentration camp. He has almost no muscles and his skin clings to his thin bones. A woman lying on the floor under his bed, probably his daughter, is breastfeeding her child. Putting ancient, forged handcuffs with a chain on my feet, the guard fastens them to the headboard. An elderly nurse in a white paper cap with a red cross approaches the patients one by one, pompously carrying a tray with syringes. It’s my turn to be pricked. Taking a syringe from the general pile, she quickly gives me an injection. I understand that everyone is injected with the same medication. I hope that they don’t wash disposable syringes like they do with the gloves? After the injection, there is a pleasant drowsiness. I want to curl up, but my chained leg prevents me from doing so.

“Hey, guard, I want to relieve myself; take me to the toilet,” I shout to the guards, who sit side by side on chairs.

A half-asleep guard lazily unfastens me and leads me across the room by the arm. Near the hole in the floor, is someone’s unflushed shit and bloody bandages. Preparing to do my deed, I watch in disgust as a large worm wriggles towards my slipper. Horrified, I jump out of the toilet for fear that this parasite will have time to lay its eggs somewhere on my body.

“Don’t worry; it’s not a snake, just a worm,” the guard reassures me, looking at the pink, hand-sized beast. Evening comes. Hospital attendants bring food. It’s rice and pea sauce again. Just like in prison, everyone eats with their hands. After the scene I saw in the toilet, I don’t want to eat at all. My two guards settle in to sleep on the floor, right under my bed. It is difficult to imagine a similar situation in the Russian reality. It is unlikely that Russian cops would agree to sleep under a bed – it is more likely that I would be put there. It’s surreal. For the last half hour, two loud sets of snores have been coming from under my bed. The only distraction is to watch the rusty fan spinning above my head. The moans from different sides slightly subside. The idea that comes to me is terrifying. I want to get back home to my cell. Well, there you are. I unconsciously perceive the cell as my ‘home’.

Chapter 20. Part Two. Outside.

Holding a rifle, the police officer looks at me with interest.

“Everyone except the foreigner, leave the bus!” he bellows at the frightened passengers. “And you, sir, can remain in your place, verification does not concern you,” he says with a smile, hurrying the Nepalese with nudges in the side. Having spent almost all of my money in Kathmandu, I have decided to go to Nepal’s second largest city, Pokhara. Nadine and Valera flatly refused to continue the journey, saying that they hadn’t had time to recover from the last trip across India yet.

While the police check the passengers’ documents near the bus, I sit inside, examining its interior design. The Nepali bus is like a big, old toy. If the average Nepalese is nearly a quarter smaller than the average Russian, then their buses are correspondingly also a quarter smaller. Small windows, small doors, small seats. The interior space is carefully decorated with colorful wire, foil and rags. We stand at the latest checkpoint blocking our way. There is a revolution in Nepal. Driven into the woods, Maoist guerrilla groups sometimes make forays into small towns and villages, demanding tributes from civil servants. The passengers with the cheapest tickets climb down from the roof of the bus for inspection. In the luggage compartment, someone’s goat bleats endlessly like a madman. In Nepal, tourists are treated in a special way: we are untouchable. We are the main source of their gross income, and it is understood on both sides of the Nepalese barricades.

My window overlooks a large valley, at the bottom of which there is a small, but fast river with rapids. Ganja, growing wild everywhere, pleases the eyes. All of the Himalayas are covered with wild-growing hemp. Near the checkpoint built of sandbags, right next to the road, I see a large bush, almost twice the height of a man. Whose idea was it to call this plant ‘weed’? It’s more like a small tree. The bottom and side buds have already been carefully cut by someone. The soldiers probably don’t get bored here. You can come out from the bunker in the evening, cut some buds, smoke and contemplate the Himalayan peaks. What revolution? What guerrillas? Perhaps that is why their revolution has lasted for fifteen years. For decency’s sake, they shoot at the sky once a month to demonstrate their guerrilla resistance and probably smoke again. Once hashish was the national product of Nepal. The best strains of charas were exported. The king controlled almost the entire production of hashish in the country. My neighbor in the bus, an elderly Nepalese man who spoke decent English, told me on the way that he remembered how a few years ago on Shivaratri², the King allocated a several kilograms of hashish to the babas, and everyone could smoke chillums for free near the entrance to every Shiva temple. According to legend, once upon a time, a sacred swan brought a cannabis leaf to the god Shiva, which he smoked and then understood everything. Since then, all believers in Shiva smoke in order to come closer to the divine.

Having loaded our chickens and goats back onto the bus, we drive away from the checkpoint. Smoking a joint rolled in my lap, I look out of the window, watching as our bus rides along the edge of a cliff, not reducing its speed on the turns. ‘1,200 Micrograms’ plays in my headphones, a trance track called ‘Hashish’. “On the seventh day, Shiva created hashish,” the mysterious voice says and the magical mesmerizing music takes me away to my dreams and fantasies. Nepal is a fairytale country, a country of cannabis.

Pokhara meets me with flowering trees everywhere, a beautiful mountain lake and the snow-capped ridges of the Himalayan peaks. The white tops are so high in the sky that it seems like they are not mountains, but rather huge roads leading directly to heaven. To the place where the terrible god Shiva lives

with his beloved Parvati. Mantras in praise of the gods over melodious music are heard from everywhere: from all the small shops and restaurants located along the lake. I love this country. I love Asia in general. I probably have more Asian than European blood in me. Although I have a Russian passport, am I really a Slav? Brown eyes, brown hair, Greek nose. During my youth, I had a terrible complex about my face. Although my parents are Russian, during my school years I was constantly teased with the offensive word ‘churka’³ and laughed at for my big nose. For some reason, everyone was interested in my nationality. This question was asked by friends, teachers, and neighbors. Almost all questionnaires included this stupid question. Girls preferred blue-eyed blonde guys and didn’t pay any attention to me. Here in Asia, I finally feel at ease. I walk along the main street, enjoying the colors and sounds of Nepal, drawing up in my head the final touches to the plan not to return to my homeland. I don’t want to go back to Russia.

“Hello, Lena, hello. How are you? Is everything okay? Have you received my Nepalese samples? What do you think of the specimens of hemp fabrics? Lena, listen to me carefully: I have a plan. I know how we can legally earn in Goa. We will open a restaurant in Goa and a Hemp store. Send the fabrics to the Saratov factory for them to sew a new collection of clothes. Find a replacement for yourself, a new manager for Hemp. Pack the summer collection that we didn’t sell in the Hemp store and ship it to Goa. We’ll sell it during the winter. And in three months, pack your bags, take Vasilinka, and come here. I’ll meet you in Goa. Explain to Dymkov that we are not giving up on the business. Tell him that we will sell everything that is not sold in Russia during the season in Goa. Using that money, we will buy fabric in Nepal and send it to Saratov for production. Tell him that we will have our own production. Our Hemp won’t be lost.”