

LOVE IN A PRISON CELL

“What kind of tests?”

“Medical tests for the court, at the Serbsky Institute.”

“Is that right?” a younger man called out.

“They don’t send just any old madmen to the Serbsky. You must be very special madmen!”

“Yes, we are indeed mad,” Pasha answered with false pride. “I, for example, have a bilateral brain fracture. And he has a mild case of mentalretardation.” He burst out laughing, quite cheerfully.

Everyone smiled. Prisoners like cheerful people; they say that they don’t have to put their hands in their pockets to pull out a word.

“Come on, boys, let’s have a drink—you’ve had a long journey,” said the old man to the newcomers.

The old man was Vitsya Chetvertak. Chetvertak was a nickname meaning “quarter” because his first sentence was for twenty-five years. Since then he’d served several stretches and received terms of various lengths, but that first nickname had stayed with him. He loved two things: playing cards and tea. Yet while scholars, as everyone knows, often travel to villages to collect interesting proverbs, poems, and fairy tales, nobody had ever traveled to meet Chetvertak and write down what he said, more’s the pity. Oh, he knew some poems, that man, some real epics—poems from the Gulag. His speech was peppered with—how shall I put it?—“choice language” and oh! he could make them laugh when he was in the mood. And yet none of these poems and witticisms will ever be printed in any collection or almanac. Will they be lost, then, forever? The main theme of this story is love, so I will introduce you to only some of those in the cell, and only as and when necessary in the course of the narrative. You will get to know the others when you yourself get to prison.

But now, before we turn to matters of love, I want to introduce you to one more man, because were it not for him it is likely this story would never have happened, nor would love ever have blossomed in this place.

This man lay some distance away from the others and kept running back and forth to the toilet. He was sick. The poor soul was suffering from cold sweats and bloody diarrhea. He bore it heroically, not even seeking help from the prison administration, and this because cells where dysentery is discovered are placed under quarantine. Every prisoner in a quarantine cell has to stay there in transit for a month, and the transit cell is not a place anyone wishes to be. No cigarettes, no tea, no blankets, no sheets, and almost all those around you are strangers, from every corner of the country. On top of that you have the heat in summer, the cold in winter, cramped conditions, bedbugs, and more besides.

That is why everyone tries to get to their destination—the Gulag—as quickly as possible. So they ask prisoners who are sick to just put up with it, to bear it for a while. And they put up with it. But transit prisoners come and go. The old ones are replaced by new ones, and then the new ones ask the prisoners who are sick to wait, just a bit longer, until they’ve left. At times like this prisoners forget themselves and the solidarity they once extolled. At times like this they think only of themselves. It’s when they take you from remand, stick you in a prisoner transport train, and bring you here that you fully appreciate what architectural monstrosities Soviet prisons are. In this complex, one block was built in the time of Tsarina Ekaterina, a second block was added at the turn of the century when Stolypin was prime minister, and the third block is from the present day. Yet all of these blocks are stuck there together, interlocked in such an unattractive way . . . What an eyesore.

The cell I referred to above was situated at the end of one of these blocks, and in the corner of a second block that ran perpendicular to it was one of the women's cells. It was a small cell housing four inmates. Women in Kharkov prison were usually housed in larger cells, but this one was set aside for women with venereal disease. The women in it were being treated for gonorrhoea—the clap. Of course having a relationship, especially an intimate one, with a woman carrying a disease like that isn't really all that pleasant, but when everyone's locked in their cells and there's no danger of catching anything, well then, what does it matter? In fact, it's quite nice having a relationship with a woman, even if her nose is falling off; women are still women, after all. Chetvertak had a girlfriend in that cell called Lena. He was constantly climbing up to the window and shouting all manner of compliments to his clap-ridden beloved. But more often he would swear at her. Why did he swear at her? I'll tell you why. There were four women in her cell: Chetvertak's beloved, Lena, and then Nadia, Sveta, and Natasha. Housed in the cell one floor above them was a former police major. He had his own cell. Former policemen are not housed communally; they have their own cells so that the other prisoners don't give them any trouble. The major had a sweetheart in that cell too, just like Chetvertak. It was bold, reckless Nadia. Nadia was a former section manager in a shop and was, it seems, used to attracting the attention of policemen. It was much easier for the major to conduct a relationship with the women's cell because of the proximity of their cells. Without any trouble at all he would lower down to their cell a string onto which he had tied his romantic love letter—but also cigarettes and other things. Nadia had ulterior motives in befriending him.

The major was a rich man, and Nadia loved rich men. Both Chetvertak and the major were very jealous. Moreover, you might say they hated each other on a spiritual—in other words ideological—level.

"Lena, Lena!" Chetvertak would call.

"What is it?" the major would reply.

"You're not Lena, you stinking dog!" Chetvertak would explode. "You come down here to my cell for a bit and I'll bloody well show you reeducation! With my fists!"

I'm no more prudish than the next man, but I still can't bring myself to write even a fraction of the things that tripped off Chetvertak's tireless tongue at such times. He swore at everyone. Everyone: the major, Nadia, Lena, the prison guards (who, he said, deserved a reeducation all of their own simply for not letting him get his hands on the major); in a word, everyone.

The major, for his part, complained in every correspondence to Nadia and the other girls about why they kept up their relationship with such a degenerate. Nadia and Lena blamed each other for everything, and there was plenty of drama all around . . .

The fact that he could not write to Lena broke Chetvertak's heart. Whenever he saw the string descending from the major's cell with a letter tied on, he almost gnawed through the bars. He tried so hard to send her a letter, but to no avail; he even made a little arrow, and a catapult, but try as he might he just couldn't get a letter to Lena. The grill always got in the way.

That was until Pasha arrived . . .

The very first day his batch of transit prisoners arrived, Pasha improvised an air gun. He rolled up a newspaper to make a tube. He glued it securely together. Then he made a special bullet out of paper, in a similar shape to a badminton shuttlecock. The point of the bullet was made of bread softened to be like dough. Bullets like that always fly point first. Pasha wound thread onto the conical paper tail in a particular way, then inserted the bullet into the newspaper tube, stuck the tube out of the window, aimed it at the women's cell, and blew hard. He hit his target first time. None of them had thought it would work, because the women's cell had a different, modern kind of grill fixed onto it. The grill consisted of iron sheets welded at an angle onto the bars. This made it look like the bellows on a Russian accordion, from where the grill it took its name—they called the grill a *bayan*.

"Lena, Lena," called Pasha.

"What?" Lena called back.

"Lenushka, I've shot a paper bullet at your cell, pick it up and pull it through carefully. There's a very fine thread tied to the bullet, and tied to that fine thread is a thicker thread; when you get to the thicker thread tie it to the grill and let me know when you've done it, okay?"

"Okay!"

Lena understood what was required of her and did everything just as Pasha had told her to.

"Right," Pasha told Chetvertak, "the line's up; you can write your letter!"

Prisoners used to call those kind of string set-ups "lines."

Chetvertak wrote his letter:

My dear Lenushka, at last I have been given the means by which to write you this little letter. I want to tell you that I love you very, very much. Lena, there are two guys in here who want to start writing to Sveta and Natasha. They are called Sanya and Vanya. They come from Ukraine, so please ask the girls to be sure to write. Sveta and Natasha can decide between themselves which guy they want. That's all for now, so I'll say good-bye. My heart pounds in anticipation of your reply, while Sanya and Vanya eagerly await their replies from Natasha and Sveta. I kiss your lips many times.

Your Chetvertak."

But I am rather perplexed. There are some Russian words I just do not know how to translate. These are the words Russians use when they're indulging in flirting and sweet talk. It's the little diminutive forms they use to make their words sound softer, more delightful. A

plain old nose—*nos*—becomes a *nosik*, your eyes—*glaza*—become your *glazki*. But unfortunately other languages don't always let us do this. Although actually no, it's not down to the language. Sometimes it's just that national characteristics—whether that's Georgian candor or English reserve—prevent us from speaking to women in the way Russians do. But how can I properly represent their flirtations if I don't soften my language as they do? I can't write "nose" when they say *nosik* or "eyes" when they say "*glazki*." That would be sacrilege. So in this story don't laugh if you read, "nosey-wose" instead of nose, or "ittybitty cheeklets" instead of cheeks. Everything new feels strange. If you can get used to speaking to women like this you'll be on your way to becoming a real gentlemen. The women's cell, of course, took no time in replying. Three letters arrived at once: Lena wrote to Chetvertak, Natasha to Sanya, and Sveta to Vanya. It was the start of a spirited correspondence. Lena, Natasha, Sveta, Chetvertak, Sanya, and Vanya wrote letters back and forth and swore their love for each other. The women liked the fact that their sweethearts were hardened criminals. The gentlemen, for their part, were satisfied too—although not with their beloveds' venereal status. But after all, it was

only the clap. People see things differently in prison. I mean, you're not going to find the Queen of England in prison, are you? And anyway, it's not leprosy and it's not AIDS. It's the STD version of a head cold, and there's enough medicine to treat everyone: Tanya, Lena, Sveta, Natasha, and the Queen of England herself, if necessary. Nothing stands in the way of love, because love knows no boundaries!

I forgot one vital detail. Do you remember the prisoner with dysentery? He became very ill—in fact he was dying—and the prisoners themselves called for a doctor. The patient was taken off somewhere. A number of rather beefy nurses, in white gowns discolored by excessive washing, and large guards came down to the cell. They lined the inmates up in the corridor and then inserted a special wire swab into the rectum of each and every one in turn, so as to establish whether they had dysentery. To be precise, it was one of the nurses, a plump Ukrainian woman, who stuck the swab in. The guards just stood and glared. Their presence made it impossible for the prisoners to put up any resistance. The guards in Kharkov prison aren't big fans of discussion, and like it or not you have to do what the administration deems necessary, and that's that.

"Gently! Gently, woman!" cried one prisoner with his pants down.

"Ow!"

"Next!" boomed the woman.

"Give it here, I'll do it myself!" groaned the next one.

"Bend over!" replied the woman.

"Oh, I should screw your mother, you—" he cursed.

"Screw your own mother, it'll be cheaper," the woman replied, impassive.

There was no anger or hysteria while this was going on. There was no sense of animosity; on the contrary, everyone found it entertaining in their own way; for the prisoners, nurses and guards it was an excuse to joke about for a bit.

I want to share this with you, dear reader, and to warn you so that when the time comes for you to have dealings with a woman like this you'll know what to do. And I beg you, do exactly what I advise, just as is laid out in the rules below.

How to deal with your nurse during insertion of a wire swab:

1. Smile as warmly as you can at the nurse and look into her eyes. A few sweet words are also advisable.
2. Drop your pants, squat, relax and open up the muscles in your posterior as widely as you can. But be quick! Remember: if you don't relax and open up in good time, you can expect to feel a degree of pain.
3. You should in no way reveal any dissatisfaction, and under no circumstances, oh-no-no-no-no-no, should you put up any resistance to the white-coated nurses. Remember: irresponsible actions like that will result in intervention by those rather large guards.

And then . . .

There was one proud young man who talked back to the nurse. In fact, he put up a bit of a fight. For his trouble, those rather large guards bent him over quite mercilessly while the outraged nurse rammed the wire swab into his tensed body with as much force as she could muster. The result?

One hell of a pain in the ass.

The testers took the swabs and cultivated them in the laboratory. It took no time for the swabs to yield a result. They came up positive for a few men, who turned out to have dysentery. They took the sick men to the prison hospital, needless to say, and quarantined the cell.

“Pfft!” Chetvertak spat onto the floor. “I knew we’d get stuck in this damned Kharkov transit center! I felt it in my bones! They eat their porridge with dirty hands, like pigs. Then they get sick and make everyone else sick too. But anyway, I should sit down and write to my beloved!”

So Chetvertak writes Lena a letter:

My dear Lenushka, I want to let you know that something very unfortunate has happened in our cell. We’ve been quarantined because some of the cellmates turned out to have dysentery. But when they eat their porridge from their bowls like pigs, well, what do you expect to happen? Now wait, wait until this quarantine is lifted. The one thing that brings me comfort is knowing that you love me, my lover, my beauty, my pride, and it is only your letters that dispel my heartache! That is my situation. I kiss your cheeklets, your itty-bitty eyes, your lovely lips and your nosey-wose a thousand times! Your Chetvertak.

Lena wrote this reply:

My dear Vitsinka! You will probably be angry with me, but I shall tell you nonetheless: I am immeasurably happy that you are still here! Quarantine is good, my little bunny! Just imagine if you had gone with the last batch to the Gulag; whatever would I have done? You know, surely, that I cannot live without you? You are the first man in my life to have left an indelible mark, to have lit the fire of love in my heart. I don’t know why—probably because I just sit here and because I’ve had very few men in my life—but I can’t live without you anymore. When I get out of here I won’t steal again; I’ll wait for you, and when you get out we’ll steal things together!

But for now I kiss your lips a million times, Yours alone, Lenka.

That’s all well and good, but let’s get to the point. As I have already told you, there were a great number of romantic letters flying back and forth between the cells. And these letters were all the same. I kiss you, you kiss me, I love you, you love me, and so on. So I won’t bore you with them anymore, we’ll read just one more important letter that Nadia sent—as it happens, just around the time they moved the major to a different cell.