A Gulag Mouse
by
Arthur M. Jolly
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All productions of this play must include the following credit:
Originally Produced by Babes With Blades, Chicago, Illinois, USA
CAST:

THE WOMEN
ANASTASIA - A young war bride. Beautiful and refined.
MASHA - Physically intimidating, brash. She has a prison tattoo on her arm.
SVETLANA - Older than the others, in more ways than one. Inured to the suffering around her.
LUBOV - Sexy, but tawdry more than pretty - as vulnerable as she can be and still survive in these circumstances.
PRUSHKA - Her nickname is “mouse”, which fits her perfectly.

ADDITIONAL ROLES (THE MEN)
EVGENY - The domineering husband of Anastasia - charming and brutal. Maybe only a bad memory. (Double cast with Ivanov).
IVANOV - The teenage son of Anastasia. Maybe only a dream.
GUARDS - Offstage voices. These could also be pre-recorded along with the necessary sound effects. (Boots marching, etc.)

SETTING:
The action occurs in an inmates’ bunkhouse of a Siberian gulag in the post-war Soviet Union, bookended by a scene in a train station and in a forest clearing. The opening and closing scene occur almost in a no-place, a hazy memory - lighting sufficiently isolating that they could play in the center of the stage, while the scenery for the bunkhouse is left in darkness around them. In contrast, the bunkhouse is brutal and coldly real. There are four rough wooden bunks against one wall, two up and two across, solid and practical, and one additional bunk or cot on the other wall, next to a wood burning stove with a few meager pieces of firewood alongside. There are no bars - or glass - on the window - but it has been mostly covered with a piece of metal, with the gaps around it stuffed with straw to keep out the bitter cold. There is one entrance, ostensibly directly opening on the outdoor prison yard. This can be set S.R. or S.L. as the staging and set design allows.

TIME:
September, 1949.

ACT I:
Scene One - A train station
Scene Two - The bunkhouse

ACT II
Scene One - The bunkhouse
Scene Two - A hazy “no place”
PLAYWRIGHT’S NOTES:
The glossary provided at the end is only to assist the actors in interpreting their roles, the general meanings should be contextually clear enough for the audience to follow. While this play and its setting are purely imaginary, including liberties taken with time, language and political history, nevertheless the joke Prushka tells is one of the forbidden anekdoti that did carry a ten year prison term merely for telling it, and the scenario with the avietchka - while known by different names in different gulags - did indeed occur as a not unusual method of escape.

A GULAG MOUSE premiered in March, 2010, produced by Babes With Blades at the Trap Door Theatre, Chicago, Il. The production was directed by Brian Plocharczyk, with Fight Choreography by David Woolley and assisted by Libby Beyreis. Lighting Design by Leigh Barrett, Set Design by Jeff Lisse, and Scene Painting by Kristine Borcz. Costume Design by Jessica Pribble, Sound Design by Adam Smith, Production manager Morgan Manasa. The Stage Manager was Kjerstine McHugh and the Ass’t Stage Manager was Ruth Meridjen. The opening night cast was as follows:

Anastasia -----------------------------Gillian N. Humiston
Evgeny/Ivanov --------------------------Dustin Spence
Masha -------------------------------Amy E. Harmon
Svetlana -------------------------------Delia Ford
Lubov -------------------------------Kathrynne Wolf
Prushka --------------------------------Stephanie Repin
Understudy -----------------------------Danielle Defassio
SCENE 1

The sound of a train pulling into a station - wheels clanking, the hiss of steam as it lurches to a stop. At rise, steam billows out across the stage. ANASTASIA stands, in a fancy coat with a high fur collar. She conceals an ornate dagger. EVGENY, in a trenchcoat and military jackboots stands in shadow, barely visible.

ANASTASIA. Evgeny.
EVGENY. My little mouse.
ANASTASIA. You lost weight.
EVGENY. You wouldn't believe the things I have eaten. Our own horses. Cut to pieces where they fell. And when they were gone, we ate the crimson snow beneath them. And when that was gone... (Beat) You do what you have to, to survive. Did you think I would come home fat?
ANASTASIA. I did not think you would come home at all. I thought you would die at the front - a hero of the motherland.
EVGENY. Widow's weeds - they would not become you. Should I leave my little mouse all alone in this cold world?
ANASTASIA. I would get by.
EVGENY. Five years, and this is how you speak to your husband? You have learned insolence while I was away. Where did they send you? Novgorod - to work in a factory? To the provinces, to root in the dirt like a farmer's pig? You have forgotten yourself. Your place. (He breathes in) Moscow smells like death and starvation. Like a million people hungry. And you have a fine coat. What is a husband to think? (He grabs her) Have you managed to keep your legs shut, bliad?
ANASTASIA. You know nothing of how my life is.
EVGENY. Must I beat the wantonness out of you? (He pulls back his fist to hit her. Anastasia stops him with the dagger.)
ANASTASIA. I am not afraid of you any more, Evgeny - leave. Get back on the train, go. There doesn't have to be blood.
EVGENY. Still my little hothead, so angry! Or are you timid? A dutiful wife would not fear her husband - if he corrects her, it is for her own benefit - because I care for you, Ani. You do not think. In your anger, you snatch a hot kettle from the stove, you must throw it or be burned. But you stand there, like a simpleton. Timid. Look at you - the dagger shakes in your hand. ANASTASIA. Do not make me do this.

EVGENY. What will you do? *(Beat)* Do you expect me to be scared? *(He snorts)* Such a dagger - fit for an honor guard! What did you trade for this antique? Perhaps the same thing you traded for your fine coat. But you will remember your duty now. I am your husband. *(He reaches out and smacks her forehead - with utter contempt)* So, my little mouse, will you scratch the cat?

ANASTASIA. No, you can't - I have a - I - I

EVGENY. *(Mocking her)* No - I - I - I... Can you not even squeak, little mouse? Look how your hand shakes! You know everything, you are now the husband, eh? Will you not drive it home then, stab your man - right here, stab my heart, my strong heart. Make it quick - like a soldier's kindness. *(More mocking taps to her head and face)* I faced the bayonets of Germans - I ate their blood. Shall I now quake before my own wife? I was given the Order of Lenin by Kaminsky himself. Quick, little one, stab a hero of the motherland. No?

ANASTASIA. Why does it have to be like this?

EVGENY. Because you want it like this. You love it, bliad. I know the games you play. You have hungered for your husband too long. So I will take my belt to you., eh? Leave you gasping and panting like a dog, and then, then you will be quiet and the fire will go out of your eyes and you will be a good wife. Nothing changes, my little mouse. Nothing. *(Anastasia thrusts the dagger into his stomach.)*

ANASTASIA. *(A change in tone)* Nothing changes, eh? Please, time did not stop when you went away - it does not stop for you, Evgeny. Everything has changed! *(Evgeny falls to his knees.)*

EVGENY. Who are you? *(Whistles blow. The sounds of voices yelling in Russian - "Shevelis! Skorah!" Anastasia places the dagger to his throat.)*

ANASTASIA. You have a son, Evgeny. A son! Ivanov. And you will never see him. *(She draws the dagger across his throat. He collapses. Blackout.)*
SCENE 2

The bunkhouse. It is dark outside. MASHA sits on her bunk - as still as death, looking at the prison tattoo on her arm. After a beat, SVETLANA. enters.

MASHA. Well?
SVETLANA. Nothing. Nothing at all.
MASHA. What d'you mean, nothing? She said she could make it happen.
SVETLANA. My nails are white.
MASHA. Now you know why she traded.
SVETLANA. You wouldn't believe it in there.
MASHA. I was in there three weeks straight. My hands were white too - on the first day. White as a ghost. By the end of the second week, in the bleach my fingernails peeled off. (Beat) They grow back. Rub dirt on them.
SVETLANA. That will help? (Masha shrugs.)
MASHA. Nothing, huh.
SVETLANA. Not this time. Maybe the new girl will die soon.
MASHA. We can hope. (LUBOV enters, with PRUSHKA.)
SVETLANA. (Warning to Masha) Alë.
MASHA. Lubov - you owe us.
LUBOV. I owe you der'mó.
MASHA. You owe. Svetlana worked your shift in the tubs for you. The bleach turned her hands white.
LUBOV. And?
MASHA. And I hear we're getting another girl in here anyway. So we start sharing bunks again?
LUBOV. You're welcome to sleep on the floor.
MASHA. You failed.
LUBOV. M'ne pó fîgu.
MASHA. M'ne pó -?! You said this new girl, she'd go to another bunkhouse, or to isolation. Somewhere else. You could arrange it.
LUBOV. Careful.
MASHA. Are you losing your influence? Maybe Yuri isn't the friend he used to be.
SVETLANA. Masha - what are you doing?
MASHA. Well?
LUBOV. I said I would try.
MASHA. Anyone can try. You failed.
LUBOV. If I owe anyone, I owe Svetlana.
SVETLANA. It's fine. You don't owe me -
MASHA. If you owe her, you owe all of us! You said -
LUBOV. I promised nothing!
MASHA. You're weak.
LUBOV. You think you can do better?
MASHA. You failed.
SVETLANA. Don't do this.
MASHA. What - she gets the best food, she gets the bunk near the stove - why?
LUBOV. Because Yuri the guard thinks I am pretty. I bat my eyes, he gives me whatever I want. That's why.
MASHA. It's not your eyes he trades for.
LUBOV. What would you know? Have you ever had a man? Other than your own Papa?
MASHA. What does Yuri give you? Old bread? A scrap of meat? That is what you are worth to him - a scrap of meat.
LUBOV. When Polina's leg was infected, who got sulfur for her?
MASHA. What did you give him for that? Your zhópa? (Lubov slaps Masha, who swings at Lubov - and it's on. They fight - and the tone - with all of the fights - is vicious and realistic. Damage lasts throughout the play - but emotion changes. Their violence is a tool to be used, the only one they have. In this fight, Masha has size and strength, Lubov has speed. Lubov has a vicious desperation that gives her an early lead, but as she tires, Masha's strikes land with devastating results. Lubov's position in this hierarchy isn't based on physical superiority. Prushka tries to stop them, but Svetlana steps in and prevents her. Lubov breaks away, grabbing for something under her bunk - but that's the opening Masha needs to overwhelm her. Masha takes Lubov down to the ground and is ready to destroy her face - but Svetlana intervenes and pulls her away.)
SVETLANA. Not her face! Not her face!
MASHA. Who are you to -?
SVETLANA. We need her!
MASHA. She thinks she's -
SVETLANA. We need her pretty. If you hurt her face, will Yuri look at her twice? Or will he find another - from another bunk? (Masha's not done - but she settles for kicking Lubov in the lower gut - a brutal, damaging kick. Prushka joins in with Svetlana to tear Masha away.) Let her be!

MASHA. You're on her side now?

SVETLANA. I'm on the side of surviving. Without the extra food she -

MASHA. She steals most of it.

SVETLANA. She earns it! She shares some.

MASHA. I'm taking her bunk.

SVETLANA. Can you afford it?

MASHA. I'll beat anyone that -

SVETLANA. Hungry! (Beat) We'll all be hungry. We need the extra she brings.

MASHA. It's not enough.

SVETLANA. Better than nothing. (Masha turns away, angry but helpless. Svetlana and Prushka help Lubov into her own bunk - the single one near the stove.)

LUBOV. You're... jealous.

MASHA. Of a bliad? You think I want his greasy hands on me?

SVETLANA. But you eat the food she provides.

MASHA. That's for survival.

SVETLANA. Everything is. (Lubov moans with pain, and rolls over. From outside, the sound of marching boots.)

GUARD. (Offstage) Pre krash chaats! (The marching stops. Anastasia enters as though shoved. She stands there, unsure. She is dressed in the same rags and cast-offs as the others - only somehow newer, more complete. She carries a folded, threadbare blanket.) Marsh eer a vaats! (The sound of marching boots again again, fading into the distance. After an awkward pause, Masha approaches Anastasia.)

MASHA. Well, look at this. How many rubles did that hair cost? (Masha takes the blanket and casually tosses it - on her own bunk.) Soft hands, too. Lubov, feel this chaynik's hands. Like velvet... No?

ANASTASIA. I'm Anastasia

MASHA. Tell us in a week, chaynik.

ANASTASIA. Where do I -?

MASHA. No one cares. (Anastasia walks towards an empty bunk.) Not that one. That is Prushka's. (Anastasia moves over one.) Polina's.
ANASTASIA. Just tell me which one is mine.
MASHA. None of them.
ANASTASIA. Where do I sleep?
MASHA. Anywhere that isn't a bed.
SVETLANA. Let me see your hands. (She examines them.) You can share my bunk.
ANASTASIA. Because I have soft hands? (Beat.)
MASHA. Go on, tell her, Svetlana.
ANASTASIA. Svetlana... Bulgarian?
MASHA. Where are you from? The Tzar's palace? ... Tell her, Svetlana.
SVETLANA. She doesn't need to know.
MASHA. Svetlana knows you will only be here a week. Less. It's why we don't bother learning your name. The tzarinas, the delicate ones, with your fine skin, and your fancy hair. Talking through your nose at the rag-people you find yourself surrounded by for the first time in your sheltered life. You will see.
ANASTASIA. Tzarina?
MASHA. What did you do, before? You weren't working with your hands. Shop girl? Not with that hair. How did you spend the war? Riveting tank treads in Novgorod? I don't think so. What were you? The mistress of a party shishka - sent here when his wife found out? What? (Beat) Women with soft hands never last. On the first day of work you will ache like never before in your life, digging in frozen ground, dragging heavy logs with your soft hands. The second day, you will stumble, and on the third day you will fall. And they will kick you up again and make you work harder. On the fourth day, you will not get up. They will grind your soft hands under their steel boots, but you will not rise. You think you will live to see the sun on the fifth day? The sixth? Svetlana will share her bunk because she is farthest from the stove, and because she knows that it is only for a week, and there will be nothing left of you. (Masha pushes Anastasia aside. Anastasia grabs Masha and shoves her.)
ANASTASIA. I am not as weak as you think.
MASHA. Don't start.
ANASTASIA. You know nothing about me.
MASHA. One week. You have one week to live.
SVETLANA. But here, a week can be a lifetime, and a night can drag on for longer than that - so it all works out. *(Lubov cries out in pain. Svetlana goes to her.)*

ANASTASIA. What's wrong with her?

MASHA. Indigestion. Too much caviar.

SVETLANA. She's bleeding.

ANASTASIA. Let me look.

SVETLANA. She doesn't want your help.

ANASTASIA. I might be able to -

SVETLANA. She doesn't want your help.

ANASTASIA. But why?

PRUSHKA. You're pretty.

MASHA. And the mouse talks! It must be a holy day. What did you squeak?

PRUSHKA. She's pretty. *(Masha pulls Anastasia's hair back, examines her closely.)*

MASHA. Lubov - you might want to see this girl. I know Yuri will.

*(Anastasia pushes Masha's hand away, and goes to Lubov's bunk.)*

ANASTASIA. Let me through. I can help her.

SVETLANA. There is no help here. Not for anyone. *(Svetlana blocks her way.)*

ANASTASIA. Let me through.

SVETLANA. She won't thank you. The rules are different here.

ANASTASIA. You can explain them to me later. *(Anastasia pushes past Svetlana, and kneels down, examining Lubov with apparent experience.)* She has a fever, and swelling - here. Might be her appendix. Do we have water?

MASHA. Only champagne and French brandy.

PRUSHKA. There is a well.

ANASTASIA. Clean water. It must be clean.

PRUSHKA. It is clean enough to have frogs in the summer.

ANASTASIA. Is there still snow?

SVETLANA. There is always snow.

ANASTASIA. Bring some - for her stomach. *(Prushka looks at Masha for tacit permission.)*

MASHA. M'ne pù figu. Fetch some snow. Or drag her out into it, cut out the bureaucracy. *(Prushka hurries out. Anastasia and Masha look at each other - sizing up the competition.)* A week, *chaynik.*
ANASTASIA. I take it... you are the boss here. *(Masha looks at Lubov - out of it.)*

MASHA. For now. Looks like it.

ANASTASIA. What did you do?

MASHA. I worked for a living.

ANASTASIA. No, to end up here. Trading on the black market?

MASHA. What the hell would you know?

ANASTASIA. What did you do?

MASHA. I killed my -

MASHA. No one cares! You think you are something special? A murderer, a thief - whatever you have done, there is someone in here who has done worse, stolen bigger, killed more, killed their only... what you did is nothing. The only thing that matters is what you do now, here.

ANASTASIA. You stole an apple, didn't you. *(Masha breaks - amused in spite of herself.)*

MASHA. You think you can help her? *(Anastasia nods.)* I need her to live - but I would be happy to see her die as well. It is an interesting situation.

ANASTASIA. I'll do what I can.

SVETLANA. I meant what I said. She will not thank you. There are no obligations here.

ANASTASIA. I wouldn't expect any.

SVETLANA. You'll learn.

ANASTASIA. Apparently not. I will only be here a week.

SVETLANA. Maybe you will toughen up in time.

ANASTASIA. Maybe. *(Prushka enters with a double handful of snow.)*

PRUSHKA. My fingers are numb.

ANASTASIA. Here. Put it on her stomach - right here. *(Lubov moans as they pack the snow over her lower abdomen.)*

PRUSHKA. Will she be all right?

ANASTASIA. Something inside is bruised or ruptured. Her liver - it will heal. Her appendix - no. Maybe it is only bruised.

PRUSHKA. It matters.

ANASTASIA. She's a friend, huh?

PRUSHKA. She brings us extra rations.

ANASTASIA. No friends in a gulag?

MASHA. No. No friends. You are in isolation - even when you stand for roll call with two hundred women. You are alone. We are all alone here.
ANASTASIA. The snow should help the swelling. We will have to wait and see what the damage is.

MASHA. So we have a nursemaid in the bunkhouse. I am Masha. That is Lubov.

ANASTASIA. And you?

PRUSHKA. Prushka.

MASHA. You can call her Mouse - everyone does. She hates it, but she doesn't try to stop them, so she has no one to blame.

ANASTASIA. *(Struck by it)* Mouse.

SVETLANA. Polina works in the kitchens today - another hour more. When you meet her, don't look at her scar. She doesn't like that.

ANASTASIA. Thanks.

SVETLANA. Don't thank me - I've just had enough fighting for one night.

MASHA. Enough for a lifetime, right? *(Beat.)*

SVETLANA. I got in a fight with my husband. That's why I'm here.

ANASTASIA. Husbands... can be trouble.

SVETLANA. You are married?

ANASTASIA. Not any more.

MASHA. Svetlana never fights.

SVETLANA. I don't care anymore. You only fight if you feel.

MASHA. You are too old.

SVETLANA. That must be it.

MASHA. See? Tell Lubov she is too old, she will -well, she will bleed on you and moan right now, but another day - or me? Call me old, you will be picking up your teeth.

ANASTASIA. I believe you.

MASHA. You should. This one? Whatever. You could kick her, she won't fight.

SVETLANA. Don't kick me.

MASHA. But you won't fight.

SVETLANA. I'll wait and put ground glass in your food. *(Lubov moans softly.)*

ANASTASIA. What happened to -?

SVETLANA. Relax. I never touched her. She got kicked. You see? That is why I never fight. One day, you are well, the next - like so. From a kick. Not worth it.

MASHA. But your husband, you fight with.
SVETLANA. A long time ago. When I was a hot-head, like you.
MASHA. You were never like me.
SVETLANA. Always. One time, things go too far. And what happens? I was sentenced to eight years.
PRUSHKA. Only eight?
SVETLANA. It was an accident. My husband was another like Masha - a hot-head. The two of us, always going. One night, he was late after work - he'd stopped off for vodka on the way - his food was cold. He hit me with a plate of pierogies. Here. See the scar? ... In a fight between a husband and a wife, something always breaks. He threw the dinner I had made, I took up the kettle off the stove. It burnt my hand - here - but I threw it. ... Plate breaks - skull okay. Kettle okay - skull breaks. Something always breaks. The shape of the world.
PRUSHKA. Eight years only.... I got ten.
MASHA. Tell her why. .. You should hear why. Svetlana brains her husband, eight years. Prushka gets ten. Tell her. (*Prushka shakes her head.*)
ANASTASIA. You don't have to.
MASHA. No, tell her. You will love this.
PRUSHKA. I talked too much.
MASHA. See? (*To Prushka*) She already noticed you never rest your mouth. When you went to get snow, she was telling us: that Prushka - yak, yak, yak.
ANASTASIA. Why did you get ten years? (*Prushka shakes her head.*)
MASHA. She told an anekdot.
PRUSHKA. I didn't know.
SVETLANA. Criticizing the government is treason.
PRUSHKA. I didn't know! It was a joke. No one told me it was forbidden.
ANASTASIA. What was it? (*Prushka looks down.*) Tell me.
MASHA. Try and get milk from a billy goat. I have been here three years, she will not tell.
PRUSHKA. It's forbidden.
ANASTASIA. Forbidden? Surely not here. I spent three days on a train. They dragged me in here past a fence with barbed wire, past barking dogs and men with guns marching up and down in the cold, freezing their balls off to protect the motherland from our dangerous presence. We are invincible here. With all of that between you and those who would harm us, here is the only place you can talk freely. (*A moment.*)
MASHA. Five minutes, and she is the warden of the gulag. You know so much. Tell us all about these fences, about the dogs with guns and the men who bark. I never noticed.

ANASTASIA. I keep my eyes open.

MASHA. But your ears will remain empty. She won't tell.

ANASTASIA. (To Prushka) What will they do, that they have not already done? (Beat.)

PRUSHKA. You want to hear the anekdot?

ANASTASIA. Tell me. Tell me the story so funny it deserves ten years in Siberia.

MASHA. This I want to hear. (Prushka works up her nerve.)

PRUSHKA. A rabbit runs through the forest, calling out: Comrades, comrades!

MASHA. So the rabbit can speak.

SVETLANA. Hush. Let her tell.

MASHA. I am not stopping her. (Beat. Masha gestures for Prushka to continue.)

PRUSHKA. The rabbit runs through the forest, he calls out -

MASHA. You told us this. The rabbit calls: Comrades, comrades!

PRUSHKA. Yes... the rabbit -

MASHA. We know the rabbit.

SVETLANA. Masha -

MASHA. Go on. We are all listening. (Beat.)

PRUSHKA. There's a rabbit -

MASHA. We know the rabbit! He calls: Comrades! Comrades! - Go on. (Prushka can barely speak.) What does the rabbit do?!

PRUSHKA. He calls... The rabbit - he is in the forest -

MASHA. Good place for a rabbit. But you told us this already.

SVETLANA. Masha -

MASHA. All I know is the rabbit!

PRUSHKA. The... the rabbit, he... (She falters.)

MASHA. The rabbit in the forest calls: Comrades! Go on!

PRUSHKA. He - he calls: Comrades! Comrades!

MASHA. We know he calls comrades!

PRUSHKA. C-C- Call - calling comrades!

MASHA. Oh!

PRUSHKA. Comrades, hide yourselves!
MASHA. Hide yourselves?
PRUSHKA. Hide yourselves! The chekisti are coming to castrate all the bears!
MASHA. You mean all the rabbits.
SVETLANA. Let her tell it!
MASHA. Which is it, the rabbits or the bears?
PRUSHKA. The rabbit runs through the forest -
MASHA. Calling comrades! This much I know. The guards in the kalanchç, they can tell you this. (Prushka is almost in paroxysms. She tries to speak again - each time, cut off by Masha interrupting with nonsensical babbling and stuttering - which is enough that Prushka can't get the words out. A beat.)
PRUSHKA. The rabbit -
MASHA. Will ten years be enough?
SVETLANA. Let her be!
MASHA. I want to hear the anekdot! Please, we have the tzarina here, she has come all the way from Moscow past fences and dogs with guns and men with frozen balls, just to hear Prushka speak. Quiet everyone! Quiet for Prushka the Mouse! Lubov - bleed your guts out quietly, stop moaning like a goat, the great Prushka wishes to address the proletariat masses. (Prushka turns away.) Feh.
ANASTASIA. (Quietly, to Prushka) Tell me later.
MASHA. Speak now, tomorrow the tzarina will be too broken to listen to your bazçr. (Prushka turns, defiantly.)
PRUSHKA. He says hide yourselves! Hide yourselves! The chekisti are coming to castrate all the bears! He sees a deer, and he says: Hide yourself! The chekisti are coming to castrate all the bears! He sees a mink, and he says: Hide yourself! The chekisti are coming to castrate all the bears! He sees a hedgehog, and he says: Hide yourself! The chekisti are coming to castrate all the bears! The hedgehog looks at him and says: I am not a bear. You are not a bear, why should we hide? And the rabbit says: After the chekisti catch you, they put you in a cage and they castrate you. Then you can petition the commissar to claim you are not a bear. (Beat.)
MASHA. It's not that funny.
PRUSHKA. I know.
ANASTASIA. That got you ten years?
PRUSHKA. My neighbor's husband heard me. He reported it.
MASHA. Hear that, Svetlana? Another husband causing trouble.
SVETLANA. The shape of the world.
MASHA. (To Prushka) Tell me another one. (Pause) In three years. Don't rush yourself. (Prushka shrinks onto her bunk.)
ANASTASIA. Ten years.
SVETLANA. This will be interesting.
MASHA. What?
SVETLANA. Her.
MASHA. Don't get attached.
ANASTASIA. Did you mean what you said?
MASHA. A week?
ANASTASIA. Yes.
MASHA. It's average. The longer you survive, the longer you are likely to keep surviving.
ANASTASIA. Ten years?
MASHA. Prushka? ... Two women, since I have been here. Two women in three years survived a full sentence, and were sent away. I don't think either of them had done ten years, though. Six years, for black market trading, maybe. Eight? Svetlana could make it. Prushka? ... No chance.
ANASTASIA. And you?
MASHA. What makes you think I only got ten years?
ANASTASIA. So you will never leave.
MASHA. I like it here. I used to vacation on the shores of the Volga - a little dacha, with a steam bath in the garden, and climbing roses on the walls. There was a dock for fishing where we would... Here - this is like a vacation spa. Every day is a steam bath, only instead of birch twigs, they use whips.
ANASTASIA. I thought you were a riveter in Novgorod.
MASHA. During the war.
ANASTASIA. With a vacation home?
MASHA. I'm done talking. (Masha abruptly turns.)
ANASTASIA. Does anyone ever escape?
SVETLANA. They try. About once a month.
ANASTASIA. Does anyone make it?
MASHA. None of them come back.
SVETLANA. The problem is food. The guards only march the fenceline when the train comes - to look good for the commissar. The rest of the month, they don't bother. Where would you go? If they left the gate open,
who would walk out? To freeze in the snow or starve. Can you walk a hundred miles with nothing to eat? 

**ANASTASIA.** But some try anyway.  

**SVETLANA.** Sometimes they -  

**MASHA.** *(Warning)* Svetlana.  

**SVETLANA.** They try. Sometimes they try anyway.  

**ANASTASIA.** The problem is food.  

**SVETLANA.** And the snow.  

**ANASTASIA.** And Polina works in the kitchen?  

**MASHA.** You are right, Svetlana. This will be interesting. *(A siren echoes a short blast from outside.)*  

**ANASTASIA.** Lights out?  

**SVETLANA.** How did you know? *(Anastasia shrugs.)*  

**MASHA.** They go bunkhouse by bunkhouse. A few minutes to walk from the first to the last. Two minutes to reach us. *(They all start getting into their bunks.)*  

**PRUSHKA.** Polina's late.  

**MASHA.** She will blunder in the dark, banging the walls, trying to find a bunk she has known for months, and wake us all up.  

**ANASTASIA.** Will she bring food?  

**MASHA.** Not for you. What have you done for Polina? She doesn't know you exist. Hope that Lubov gets well enough to be up on her knees again. *(Masha laughs at her own joke.)*  

**SVETLANA.** That's not why she asks. She is thinking, this one. Thinking like a rabbit in a snare.  

**ANASTASIA.** Of course I am. My time is apparently limited.  

**SVETLANA.** They say the best chance of escape is when you are first captured. A rabbit, if he lies still, can get free... if he struggles, the wire cuts deeper. The longer he struggles, the more he is caught... when he does lie still, he is too tired. Finished. He only waits for the hunter.  

**ANASTASIA.** So I must lie still?  

**SVETLANA.** In my bunk, yes... but it is too late. On the train, there was a chance, maybe. Now, the snare has you to the bone. The guards who march when they might be seen, when it might be reported - they spend the rest of the month guarding the inside of the kitchen, close to the stove, with their boots off. No one steals food - what, under their noses?  

**ANASTASIA.** Except tonight. Tonight, she could bring food.
MASHA. She might have a whole beet for us. We will let you eat the dirt off it.

ANASTASIA. A beet.

MASHA. If we are lucky.

SVETLANA. Sleep, krùshka. There will be beet soup tomorrow for the whole camp, even for you.

MASHA. Maybe, just for a change, it will have beet in it.

ANASTASIA. A hundred miles in which direction?

SVETLANA. South, to the river. There are villages all along the Sylva. And it is only eighty seven miles.

MASHA. But a long way to go on one beet. Better to sleep. (The overhead lights turn out - moonlight, the glow from the stove remains. Masha says in a mocking tone...) Good night, Prushka. Good night, Svetlana. Good night, chaynik.

SVETLANA. Enough. (Lubov moans gently.)

MASHA. Good night, bliad. Try not to die.

PRUSHKA. Why is Polina late?

MASHA. What?

PRUSHKA. Why is Polina so late?

SVETLANA. With her scar, no guard would look at her.

MASHA. Maybe they caught her stealing food.

SVETLANA. We would have heard the shot. (Suddenly, the overhead lights of the bunkhouse come back up, snapping on unexpectedly in the middle of the night - a break in the routine. Offstage we hear soldiers yelling: Shevelis! Skorah! A siren wails. GUNFIRE - Startlingly loud, right outside the window. We can see the flash through the gaps. More yelling. Boots running on frozen ground.)

PRUSHKA. She's running tonight. Polina.

SVETLANA. You knew this?

PRUSHKA. No.

MASHA. That figures. The only one she tells is the one who never talks.

PRUSHKA. I didn't know.

MASHA. That súka.

SVETLANA. Is she at the fence yet? (A machine gun chatters in the distance.)

MASHA. That's from the kalanchá. She went under it.
SVETLANA. (To Anastasia) The guards in the tower never look straight down. If you are quiet, you can go under them... but they will see you before you get very far from the camp. (The machine gun chatters again.)

MASHA. Guns at night - the guards in the kalanchá saw them crossing the fenceline. Dogs in the morning - they got away.

ANASTASIA. If she gets past them... she will have taken food for the journey.

SVETLANA. It's still eighty seven miles of Siberia out there. She left her blanket here. So the cold...

PRUSHKA. I want her blanket.

MASHA. I want a dacha with gold floors.

ANASTASIA. To take a blanket means you cannot get food from the kitchen. So you starve.

SVETLANA. Unless you go with -

MASHA. Svetlana!

SVETLANA. What?

MASHA. Nothing. (Svetlana grunts. There's something here they are avoiding, and Anastasia can sense it.)

ANASTASIA. What?

SVETLANA. Nothing.

MASHA. That súka.

SVETLANA. Who did she know?

MASHA. She knew. She wouldn't... she knew, right?

SVETLANA. Did you ever tell her?

MASHA. No one told me.

SVETLANA. You? An avietchka? Not even when you were born.

ANASTASIA. What's an avietchka? (Pruskha shakes her head - shh.)

MASHA. D'you think they made it?

SVETLANA. The guns are quiet.

MASHA. True... but why are they quiet?

SVETLANA. Quiet is good. One way or another.

MASHA. If we hear the dogs...

SVETLANA. If she went alone - Roll call tomorrow.

PRUSHKA. I didn't know. None of us knew.

SVETLANA. I'm sure they'll take that into account.

MASHA. Súka. She runs, we get punished.
SVETLANA. If she went with others - there's another bunkhouse involved. Maybe two of them. They can't punish us all. *(Masha scoffs.)* You know what I mean. They have to worry about how it looks.

PRUSHKA. But if it's just her - then it all falls on us.

MASHA. If she went, she wouldn't go alone.

SVETLANA. Then who was the - *(She cuts off, glancing at Anastasia. They don't want to talk in front of her.)* Who could she go with? Who would be the avietchka?

MASHA. I heard there was a new girl in the bunkhouse by the latrines. Maybe. If she was stupid.

PRUSHKA. She died.

SVETLANA. Sure?

PRUSHKA. Dysentary. ... Or TB.

SVETLANA. Not really the same.

MASHA. One end or another - something was coming out. *(Prushka giggles shrilly - but stops herself abruptly.)* If not her then who?

SVETLANA. Maybe it was her. Maybe Polina was the avietchka.

MASHA. I don't believe it.

ANASTASIA. What is an avietchka?

MASHA. A baby sheep.

ANASTASIA. I know what avietchka means.

MASHA. Then mind your own business.

ANASTASIA. Prushka? *(Prushka shakes her head.)*

SVETLANA. I never told her. It's not my place to tell.

MASHA. Maybe she ran alone.

SVETLANA. Polina? With her leg? She still limps.

MASHA. Only a little. She's not that stupid. *(Beat)* Tomorrow, at the head count - we will be the ones answering for her stupidity.

SVETLANA. We will need Yuri.

MASHA. If he can't help us... *(Beat)* Maybe he can say she was from another bunkhouse. We might not be beaten at all - let someone else take it.

SVETLANA. *(To Lubov)* Lubov?

ANASTASIA. She's sleeping.

SVETLANA. Still?

ANASTASIA. It's a healing sleep. The mind shuts down, for the body's sake... she has deep bruising. Or worse. Maybe her appendix or her - I don't
know. The bruises take a while to work to the surface. If we had vodka to rub on her skin -

**MASHA.** Vodka? Oh yes, I keep it on ice, next to the *blinis*. But it's only pepper vodka, not the good stuff you must be used to. Maybe we can send your servant into Moscow to buy us a bottle.

**ANASTASIA.** In a day or two, we'll find out.

**MASHA.** She doesn't have a day or two. We work tomorrow.

**ANASTASIA.** Is there - is there a sick call? Infirmary?

**SVETLANA.** Never mind the fields tomorrow, we need her to work tonight.

**ANASTASIA.** She's sick.

**SVETLANA.** *(To Masha)* You are the súka. We need her.

**MASHA.** This is my fault?

**SVETLANA.** You kicked her!

**MASHA.** You said not to touch her face. I didn't touch her face.

**SVETLANA.** You kicked her belly - you think that's any better?

**MASHA.** She walks around here, like she owns the place -

**SVETLANA.** And you do?

**ANASTASIA.** Stop this - both of you -

**SVETLANA.** She's our one chance to survive -

**MASHA.** You call this survival?

**SVETLANA.** She did more than you ever could! You think because you are quick with your fists, because you have the temper of a wolf-bitch, that you mean anything here?

**MASHA.** Shut it, Svetlana.

**SVETLANA.** You are nothing. *(Masha grabs Svetlana's blanket, twists it around her neck, and drags her from her top bunk, straight to the floor.)*

**MASHA.** Nothing, bliad? Nothing, you cow? *(Pandemonium. Masha drags Svetlana across the floor by the strangling blanket. Prushka is paralyzed with fear. Anastasia leaps in, struggles with Masha - Svetlana is released just enough to gasp one huge, desperate breath before Masha thrusts Anastasia aside, and hauls back on the blanket, tightening it once more.)* Do you want to fight now? Do you feel this? *(Svetlana struggles - but her fight is diminishing. Anastasia leaps on Masha's back, forcing her to drop the blanket. Masha gets Anastasia off her - perhaps by running backwards into a wall, perhaps by throwing her. Masha outclasses Anastasia, no contest. Svetlana lies, panting. Masha stands over them both.)* Nothing?

**SVETLANA.** I... I take it back. Now... now wake Lubov.
ANASTASIA. She can't. (Masha walks over to Lubov's bunk. As she does...) MASHA. (To Prushka) It's a good thing you helped. Your friends, they rely on you. (Masha suddenly lunges forwards - a feint that makes Prushka back up in fear. Masha laughs.) Alë, Lubov! Your boyfriend needs you! He needs you to make him sweet like a sugar beet, like flowers in the spring. Make him so happy that in the morning, his whip hangs as limp as his khren. Luba? Wake up sleepy head.
LUBOV. Stop that.
MASHA. Good morning, krùshka.
ANASTASIA. She can't do that! She can barely walk.
MASHA. Are you telling me what she can and can't do.
ANASTASIA. Yes.
MASHA. So you are volunteering?
ANASTASIA. What?
MASHA. To go in her place. You are pretty. You are new. Are you telling me the guards didn't notice you when you came in? (Beat) I can see in your eyes they did. Did you see the one with dark hair? A mustache like a cossack? His name is Yuri, and he sits in the guard shack across the parade. When the others are hunting Polina with the dogs, he will stay, he is the sergeant. And you will go to him, and you will tell him that Lubov is unavailable this evening.
ANASTASIA. Like hell I will.
MASHA. You do it, or tomorrow they will beat you with a whip.
ANASTASIA. I'll take the whip.
MASHA. They will also beat me with a whip. And Prushka, and Svetlana... even Lubov. They will drag her from her bed, and whip her even if she is unable to feel it. Why? Because the punishment must be fair. The rule of the guards must be absolute. If they were to forgive even one blow... who would respect them then?
ANASTASIA. I will not.
MASHA. If I am whipped, I will take it out on you. You know this, everyone here will tell you. You have no friends here. You are going, chaynik.
ANASTASIA. No.
PRUSHKA. Anastasia? It will be easier if you just give in now. (Masha approaches Anastasia, then looks at Svetlana.)
MASHA. (To Svetlana) It is your skin too. How much of it will you lose for a chaynik? (Svetlana joins Masha. Masha hits Anastasia.) Go!

ANASTASIA. No. (Another blow - Anastasia turns - and meets a blow from Svetlana that knocks her to the ground. A brief melee; Anastasia outmatched, overwhelmed and inexperienced - but fighting tooth and nail. There is something in the nature of a mother bear protecting her cubs in the way she fights.)

SVETLANA. Do you think there are choices here?

ANASTASIA. There is always a choice.

SVETLANA. Get up. (Anastasia looks at Prushka for help. Prushka gets up... and joins Masha. The three of them beat on Anastasia; and now there is nothing she can do but take it.)

PRUSHKA. Pajalsta! Don't make this happen! Don't make us do this! (Prushka is reluctant - torn, but desperate nonetheless... and she breaks. When she does, it is vicious. Prushka steps back - Anastasia is left on the floor, gasping in pain.)

ANASTASIA. You cannot make me do this. You cannot make me do anything. You can hurt me, or you can kill me. That's all.

MASHA. Fair enough. (Svetlana grabs her, hauls her up to her feet, and holds her. Masha opens the stove, and grabs a smoldering chunk of wood. She threatens Anastasia with it - bringing it up to her face.)

SVETLANA. Not her face.

MASHA. You know why she tells me that, chaynik? Because she knows this is no empty threat. I am not going to wave this around and make you scared, I am going to burn you. I don't want to, but you will go to Yuri. You are too new to understand, this is survival. This will help you.

PRUSHKA. Don't do it.

MASHA. Only her feet. Yuri doesn't care about her feet. (She moves the smoldering brand down to Anastasia's ankles.)

ANASTASIA. Please... (Lubov rolls over.)

LUBOV. Stop that! I will go. (She tries to sit up. Masha throws the ember back into the stove.)

MASHA. At least someone understands here. (Svetlana lets Anastasia go - just like that, the violence is over. There is nothing personal for them - it is only a means to an end.)

ANASTASIA. You cannot. You are bleeding inside.

LUBOV. Who the hell are you?
ANASTASIA. I was a nurse.
LUBOV. Now you are a *chaynik* in a gulag and you know nothing of how this life is.
ANASTASIA. You cannot go in your condition.
LUBOV. And being whipped or beaten will be better for me? ... He can be gentle. It will not kill me. Tomorrow... tomorrow might. So I will go. (*She struggles to rise.*) Help me up. (*Prushka goes to her.*)
PRUSHKA. (*To Anastasia*) Look at her. You are doing this to her. You.
ANASTASIA. I don't... I cannot do this.
LUBOV. I thought that once. ... A long time ago. (*A moment. Anastasia turns to the door. A decision. From outside: The sounds of dogs barking - yelping, hunting.*)
SVETLANA. The guards in the *kalanchá* missed. (*Prushka turns to the window.*)
PRUSHKA. She is out there. Running through snow.
MASHA. Limping through snow. (*Beat.*)
ANASTASIA. This is how it is?
LUBOV. Always. (*Beat.*)
ANASTASIA. Where is this guard shack?
PRUSHKA. I can show you. (*They walk to the door together.*)

**INTERMISSION**

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