



15

1937 — Kolyma, that pole  
of cold and cruelty

Lisa Green

For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

The northerly gale shrieks past the high barbed-wire fences of Kolyma and collects dirt and snow, scattering loose earth into the sunken eyes of the slaving men. Viktor is momentarily blinded and he stumbles, slipping on the icy plank. His heavy wheelbarrow anchors Viktor to the ground and saves him from drowning in the thick blanket of snow that had formed overnight. He steadies himself, and continues pushing his wheelbarrow full of dirt up the narrow plank.

Up and down.

Back and forth.

Only four months have passed since Viktor was arrested and imprisoned for being a class enemy. These first few months are known to be the hardest, as the relentless weather and guards shatter the spirit of each man until they are nothing but empty shells with blank eyes and forgotten hopes. Escape is futile; nestled in the northern-most corner of Siberia, landlocked by mountainous terrain, only the treacherous wind is free to enter and leave

Kolyma. Viktor is confused about why he was sent here — detained around him are murderers, spies, and conspirators. He is just a man who had resisted work on the kolkhoz,<sup>1</sup> charged with being a social parasite who lived off the healthy Soviet Union.

Viktor fixes his eyes on the plank before him, the dull repetition of his steps a lifeline to save him from his rampant thoughts.

He talks to himself as he works: 'Load the wheelbarrow with dirt, walk up the plank, empty the wheelbarrow, walk down the plank.'

As he toils, he can see how the mound of dirt at the other end is growing, a measure of progress. The summit of the earth mountain just touches the morning sun, the ball of fire balancing precariously as if at any moment it could roll down the side of the mound, melting the snow and ice that had formed in the hours he had been working.

He is dragged from his reverie, the piercing wind tossing him back into reality. Blinking, he turns back to the Sisyphean task before him. Around him, hundreds of other men follow an identical routine to his, a scattered assembly line of dirt and men.

There was a camp rumour that 162 prisoners had been shot and buried in a pit one day and dirt had been dumped over their corpses just behind the mess hall. Their deaths served as a warning to the other prisoners: Work hard. Do not be lazy. See what happened to lazy and disobedient workers? They ended up in a pit with 161 other men, frozen in the place where they were dumped.

Viktor pays heed to this lesson, even if there is no proof that it had happened. It isn't that he is afraid of dying; he had come to accept that he might never leave Kolyma alive. In four or five years he, too, would probably rest beneath the very soil he carries, with no epitaph carved in stone to say 'here lies Viktor, a condemned man'. Rather, he fears how his death will be reduced to a statistic, a death toll for the morbidly curious. He will be as anonymous in death as he was in life, forgotten among the dirt and snow.

What was the point to all this labour, if all they would become was a tale to frighten other zeks?<sup>2</sup> The soil that was building up had no use, the hole he was digging served no real purpose. Sometimes, the guards tipped the soil he had dug up back into the hole — out of all the horrors of Kolyma, this was the most painful to a zek. Unlike the boxed ears from a beating for stealing an extra bowl of skilly,<sup>3</sup> this punishment left no physical scars. But mentally it tore at the prisoners' egos, telling them that there was absolutely no need for their labour, that they were expendable and irrelevant. Each day's progress was wiped clean by the evening roll call, a palimpsest of invisible actions.

Yet the guards insisted: 'Dig until you reach gold.'

Viktor smiles to himself. There is something romantic about a field of gold under his feet, lying dormant beneath metres of soil. He hates that they had to disturb its peaceful slumber. It was precious, one of the few things that made Kolyma beautiful. He saw Kolyma as an egg, the hard, porous shell cradling the nutritious golden yolk. Viktor and his team were the spoons that attacked the shell, cracking and destroying. Half the time the yolk would burst before they got there — it was a waste. No matter how many yolks were broken or how many men were wasted, the guards still pushed them, on and on.

That's what this government does — it takes the beauty from the earth of his nation and turns it into weapons of war, melting people down like metal into one solid working unit, gears greased by the blood and sweat of men, women and children to ensure that the nation functions smoothly.

Building our nation, they call it. The zeks were the mortar for the teetering structure of the Soviet Union — overlooked, but they kept everything from falling to pieces. He wishes he were a brick, not mortar. He wants to be seen again, to be recognised as Viktor, not by the number stitched onto his wadded jacket.

'You!'

The distant voice of a guard hurtled through the air towards Viktor, and he imagines the syllable crashing violently against his body. Each 'you' stabs blindly at his miserable heart — he is Viktor Fetuovich Petrov.

Viktor turns towards the disembodied voice, his eyes lowered.

'Should have known it was you eh, Petrov?'

The guard draws closer, close enough for Viktor to see the yellowing teeth standing sentinel to the man's wide mouth. He has something against Viktor — he is a swine of a guard. Viktor says nothing in return, waiting for the guard to continue.

'Got nothing to say, hm? That's called insolence.'

Each word is punctuated by a poke to Viktor's arm as the guard tries to rile him up. But Viktor does not react, he remains calm — his face is frozen.

'Answer when you're spoken to. Two days.'

Two days in the cell! Viktor is shocked, but he remains silent. Words of stubborn refusal were pressing against his tight lips, but the reminder that those who disobeyed orders end up six metres underground always lurked in the recesses of his memory. His body burns with the desire to do otherwise, but he cannot rein in his will to survive.

He wants to walk as a free man again.

Heaving the shovel over his shoulder, Viktor drags himself out of the hole he had been digging. Noticing the disruption to Viktor's routine, his teammates glance at him. For the prisoners of Kolyma, solitary confinement was the ninth circle of Hell. It will be Viktor's first time in the cell, but the stories he had heard from the other prisoners in the mess hall were enough to make his stomach churn.

One of his teammates, Sasha, stops digging to offer Viktor some sound words of advice.

'Don't let the silence get to you, eh, Viktor. Embrace it.'

He slips a cigarette between Viktor's fingers, 'to keep you warm'.

There is no comfort in the tall man's eyes, but the usual hard edge to his voice is gone. A seasoned general, Sasha was imprisoned because the party perceived him as an imagined threat to the regime and its vision, his power a potential weapon against Stalin.

Another faceless guard appears, a Charon,<sup>4</sup> to shepherd Viktor to his wretched fate. The guard urges Viktor to move, and with a final glance back, he walks away from Sasha and his barrowful of dirt.



Everything in the cell is grey — there is no window for the light to come through, and only a few strands of yellow dusk manage to slip under the door. There is not enough light to breathe life into his shadow, no carbon copy of his own body to comfort him in his solitude. The only sound comes from the air that rattles its way through his lungs and comes spewing back up in a hacking cough. Sasha's cigarette lies on the ground by his feet; he forgot to bring a match to light it.

Viktor tries his hardest to not touch the ground; the icy concrete is similar to the games of lava from his youth — if he falls in he is out of the game. He coils his feet under his legs on the straw mat, tucking his head in to his neck. His mind is telling him that the smaller the surface area he creates, the warmer he will be. But reason has no role in Kolyma — the cold still creeps into his clenched armpits, clinging to the lobes of his ears, and forming a thin film of moisture on the tip of his nose.

A damp patch upon a wall resembles his wife Anoushka, the pert nose and round chin distinctly hers. Craving her warmth, Viktor extends his arm towards her, caressing the pockmarked surface. But Anoushka is no longer there — the darkness has swallowed her whole.

Don't let the silence get to you, Sasha had said. But how could he not? The silence is lonely and hollow. Viktor hiccups, the staccato sound breaking the solemnity of the cell. Its echo bounces back and mocks him, playing tricks by suggesting that there are a hundred other men in the cell with him. Every flicker of his eyelashes conjures another grey zek. He can sense the pressure of a hundred pairs of indistinguishable eyes staring back at him noiselessly. The air he breathed ought to be stifling, bloated with Russian, Estonian, Ukrainian voices.

Sounds from outside are muffled as they travel through the thick concrete walls, and Viktor can only catch slivers of conversation as prisoners and guards alike pass by. Each conversation revolves around food, and his stomach grumbles violently; a small bowl of skilly sounds like an extravagant feast. Ignoring his hunger, Viktor begins to slip into sleep, the lull of the silence and the cold forcing his eyelids to close. He does not want to sleep. Falling into an eternal sleep was a weak man's death. His eyelids are fluttering, caught in a stalemate of want and need. As he stands on the precipice of unconsciousness, the words of a prisoner's song drift under his door: *I know not of a land where our hearts can beat so free.*

Viktor snakes his hand beneath his jacket, clutching his heart through the scratching material of his undershirt. Is it beating? His hands are numb, he feels nothing. Wait! No, there is definitely a dull thrum against the skin of his palm. He clamps his eyes shut, savouring each beat. Before, he had mistaken his heart's tenacity for a curse that had imprisoned him in Kolyma. He knows better now. Every beat pulses blood through the veins of his body, providing precious manna to his mind. It is a message to him that says: 'As long as this heart is beating, you will be free.' He is free from the confines of labour, the tedious suffering; he has freedom to think and to be. As his heart beats, his mind hums, imagining a great escape. His earthly body remains tied here to this unforgiving land, but his heart can leave freely — he leaps over the wire

fences and steals away. The dark is closing in, trapping him with the sinking of the sun, but his heart is lifting out of his chest, slipping through the hairline cracks in the walls and fleeing. As his heavy lids finally succumb to sleep, Viktor realises that like the coveted gold that lay beneath the cement floor, his soul is untouchable, free from the cold and greedy hands of Kolyma.

### Endnotes

- 1 Kolkhoz: a collective farm in the Soviet Union.
- 2 Zek: colloquial term for a labour camp inmate.
- 3 Skilly: thin gruel or porridge.
- 4 Charon: From Greek mythology. Charon is the ferryman of the river Styx who carries souls to the underworld.



**Lisa Green** wrote this in 2014 as a university undergraduate student in Australian Capital Territory.