

THE EIGHT-GORED HAT AND THE FLICK-KNIFE

In Transnistria February is the coldest month of the year. The wind blows hard, the air becomes keen and stings your face. On the street people wrap themselves up like mummies; the children look like plump little dolls, bundled up in countless layers of clothes, with scarves up to their eyes.

It usually snows a lot; the days are short and darkness descends very early.

That was the month when I was born. Early, coming out feet first; I was so weak that in ancient Sparta I would undoubtedly have been left to die because of my physical condition. Instead they put me in an incubator.

A kindly nurse told my mother she would have to get used to the idea that I wouldn't live long. My mother

cried, expressing her milk with a breast pump to take to me in the incubator. It can't have been a happy time for her.

From my birth onwards, perhaps out of habit, I continued to be a source of worry and distress to my parents (or rather to my mother, because my father didn't really care about anything: he went on with his life as a criminal, robbing banks and spending a lot of time in prison). I've lost count of the number of scrapes I got into when I was small. But it was natural: I grew up in a rough district – the place where the criminals expelled from Siberia were re-settled in the 1930s. My life was there, in Bender, with the criminals, and the people of our villainous district were like one big family.

When I was small I didn't care about toys. What I liked doing when I was four or five was prowling round the house to see if my grandfather or my uncle were taking their weapons apart to clean them. They were constantly doing it, with the utmost care and devotion. My uncle used to say weapons were like women – if you didn't caress them enough they'd grow stiff and betray you.

The weapons in our house, as in all Siberian houses, were kept in particular places. The so-called 'personal' guns – the ones Siberian criminals carry around with them and use every day – are placed in the 'red corner', where the family icons hang on the walls, along with the photographs of relatives who have died or are serving prison sentences. Below the icons and the photographs

there is a shelf, draped with a piece of red cloth, on which there are usually about a dozen Siberian crucifixes. Whenever a criminal enters the house he goes straight to the red corner, pulls out his gun and puts it on the shelf, then crosses himself and places a crucifix over the gun. This is an ancient tradition which ensures that weapons are never used in a Siberian house: if they were, the house could never be lived in again. The crucifix acts as a kind of seal, which can only be removed when the criminal leaves the house.

The personal guns, which are called 'lovers', 'aunts', 'trunks' or 'ropes', don't usually have any deeper meaning; they are seen as just weapons, nothing more. They are not cult objects, in the way that the 'pike', the traditional knife, is. The gun is simply a tool of the trade.

In addition to personal guns, there are other kinds of weapon that are kept around the house. The weapons of Siberian criminals fall into two broad categories: 'honest' ones and 'sinful' ones. The 'honest' weapons are those that are used only for hunting in the woods. According to Siberian morality, hunting is a purification ritual, which enables a person to return to the state of primal innocence in which God created man. Siberians never hunt for pleasure, but only to satisfy their hunger, and only when they go into the dense woods of their homeland, the Tayga. Never in places where food can be obtained without killing wild animals. If they are out in the woods for a week the Siberians will usually kill only one boar; for the rest of the time they just walk. In hunting there is no place for self-interest, only for survival. This doctrine influences the entire Siberian criminal law, forming a moral basis which

prescribes humility and simplicity in the actions of each individual criminal, and respect for the freedom of every living thing.

The 'honest' weapons used for hunting are kept in a special area of the house, called the 'altar', along with the decorated hunting belts of the masters of the house and their forefathers. There are always hunting knives hanging from the belts, and bags containing various talismans and objects of pagan magic.

The 'sinful' weapons are those that are used for criminal purposes. These weapons are usually kept in the cellar and in various hiding places scattered around the yard. Every sinful weapon is engraved with the image of a cross or a patron saint, and has been 'baptized' in a Siberian church.

Kalashnikov assault rifles are the Siberians' favourites. In criminal slang each model has a name; no one uses abbreviations or numbers to indicate the model and calibre or the type of ammunition it requires. For example, the old 7.62 mm AK-47 is called a 'saw', and its ammunition 'heads'. The more recent 5.45 mm AKS with the folding butt is called a 'telescope', and its ammunition 'chips'. There are also names for the different types of cartridge: the bottom-heavy ones with black tips are called 'fat ones'; the armour-piercing ones with white tips, 'nails'; the explosive ones with red and white tips, 'sparks'.

The same goes for the other weapons: precision rifles are called 'fishing rods', or 'scythes'. If they have a built-in silencer on the barrel, they are called 'whips'. Silencers are called 'boots', 'terminals' or 'woodcocks'.

According to tradition, an honest weapon and a

sinful one cannot remain in the same room, otherwise the honest weapon is forever contaminated, and can never be used again, because its use would bring bad luck on the whole family. In this case the gun must be eliminated with a special ritual. It is buried in the ground, wrapped in a sheet on which a mother has given birth. According to Siberian beliefs, everything connected with childbirth is charged with positive energy, because every newborn child is pure and does not know sin. So the powers of purity are a kind of seal against misfortune. On the spot where a contaminated weapon has been buried it is usual to plant a tree, so that if the 'curse' strikes, it will destroy the tree and not spread to anything else.

In my parents' house there were weapons everywhere; my grandfather had a whole room full of honest weapons: rifles of various calibres and makes, numerous knives and various kinds of ammunition. I could only go into that room if I was accompanied by an adult, and when I did I tried to stay there as long as possible. I would hold the weapons, study their details, ask hundreds of questions, until they would stop me, saying:

'That's enough questions! Just wait a while. When you grow up you'll be able to try them out for yourself . . .'

Needless to say, I couldn't wait to grow up.

I would watch spellbound as my grandfather and my uncle handled the weapons, and when I touched them they seemed to me like living creatures.

Grandfather would often call me and sit me down in front of him; then he would lay on the table an old Tokarev – a handsome, powerful pistol, which seemed to me more fascinating than all the weapons in existence.

‘Well? Do you see this?’ he would say. ‘This is no ordinary gun. It’s magic. If a cop comes near, it’ll shoot him of its own accord, without you pulling the trigger . . .’

I really believed in the powers of that pistol, and once, when the police arrived at our house to carry out a raid, I did a very stupid thing.

That day my father had returned from a long stay in central Russia, where he had robbed a number of security vans. After supper, to which my whole family and a few close friends had come, the men were sitting at the table, talking and discussing various criminal matters, and the women were in the kitchen, washing the dishes, singing Siberian songs and laughing together as they swapped stories from the past. I was sitting next to my grandfather on the bench, with a cup of hot tea in my hand, listening to what the grown-ups were saying. Unlike other communities, the Siberians respect children, and will talk freely about any subject in front of them, without creating an air of mystery or prohibition.

Suddenly I heard the women screaming, and then a lot of angry voices: within seconds the house was full of armed police, their faces covered, pointing Kalashnikovs at us. One of them came over to my grandfather, pushed the rifle in his face and shouted furiously, the tension in his voice unmistakable:

‘What are you looking at, you old fool? I told you to keep your eyes on the floor!’

I wasn't in the least scared. None of those men frightened me – the fact of being with my whole family made me feel stronger. But the tone in which the man had addressed my grandfather had angered me. After a short pause, my grandfather, not looking the policeman in the eye but holding his head erect, called out to my grandmother:

'Svetlana! Svetlana! Come in here, darling! I want you to pass on a few words to this scum!'

According to the rules of criminal behaviour, Siberian men cannot communicate with policemen. It is forbidden to address them, answer their questions or establish any relationship with them. The criminal must behave as if the police were not there, and use the mediation of a female relative, or friend of the family, provided she is of Siberian origin. The criminal tells the woman what he wants to say to the policeman in the criminal language, and she repeats his words in Russian, even though the policeman can hear what he says perfectly well, since he is standing there in front of him. Then, when the policeman replies, the woman turns round and translates his words into the criminal language. The criminal must not look the policeman in the face, and if he refers to him in the course of his speech he must use derogatory words like 'filth', 'dog', 'rabbit', 'rat', 'bastard', 'abortion', etc.

That evening the oldest person in the room was my grandfather, so according to the rules of criminal behaviour the right to communicate was his; the others had to keep silent, and if they wanted to say anything they would have to ask his permission. My grandfather was well known for his skill in dealing with tense situations.

My grandmother came in from the kitchen, with a coloured duster in her hand. She was followed by my mother, who was looking extremely worried.

‘My dear wife – God bless you – please tell this piece of filth that for as long as I’m alive no one is going to point weapons at my face or those of my friends in my house . . . Ask him what he wants, and tell him to order his men to lower their guns for the love of Christ before somebody gets hurt.’

My grandmother started repeating what my grandfather had said to the policeman, and although the man nodded to indicate that he had heard every word, she went on, following the tradition through to the end. There was something false, something theatrical about all this, but it was a scene that had to be acted out; it was a question of criminal dignity.

‘Everyone on the floor, face down. We have a warrant for the arrest of . . .’ The policeman didn’t manage to finish his sentence, because my grandfather, with a broad and slightly malicious smile – which in fact was the way he always smiled – interrupted him, addressing my grandmother:

‘By the passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who died and rose again for us sinners! Svetlana, my love, ask this stupid cop if she and her friends are from Japan.’

My grandfather was humiliating the police by speaking about them as if they were women. All the other criminals laughed. Meanwhile my grandfather went on:

‘They don’t look Japanese to me, so they can’t be kamikazes . . . Why, then, do they come armed into the heart of Low River, into the home of an honest criminal,

while he is sharing a few moments of happiness with other good people?’

My grandfather’s speech was turning into what the criminals call ‘song’ – that extreme form of communication with policemen where a criminal speaks as if he were thinking out loud, talking to himself. He was merely expressing his own thoughts, not deigning to answer questions or establish any contact. That is the normal procedure when someone wants to indicate to policemen that what he is saying is the only truth, that there is no room for doubt.

‘Why do I see all these dishonest people with covered faces? Why do they come here to dishonour my home and the good faith of my family and my guests? Here, in our land of simple, humble people, servants of Our Lord and of the Siberian Orthodox Mother Church, why do these gobs of Satan’s spit come to afflict the hearts of our beloved women and our dear children?’

In the meantime another policeman had dashed into the room and addressed his superior:

‘Comrade Captain, allow me to speak!’

‘Go ahead,’ replied a small, stocky man, in a voice that seemed to come from beyond the grave. His rifle was aimed at the back of my father’s head. My father, with a sardonic smile, went on sipping his tea and crunching my mother’s home-made walnut biscuits.

‘There are crowds of armed men outside. They’ve blocked off all the roads and have taken hostage the patrol that was guarding the vehicles!’

Silence fell in the room – a long, heavy silence. Only two sounds could be heard: the crunch of my father’s

teeth on the biscuits and the wheezing of Uncle Vitaly's lungs.

I looked at the eyes of a policeman who was standing next to me; through the holes in his hood I could see he was sweaty and pale. His face reminded me of that of a corpse I had seen a few months earlier, after it had been fished out of the river by my friends: its skin was all white with black veins, its eyes like two deep, murky pits. There had also been a hole in the dead man's forehead where he had been shot. Well, this policeman didn't have a hole in his head, but I reckon both he and I were thinking exactly the same thing: that before very long he was going to have one.

Suddenly the front door opened and, pushing aside the policeman who had just delivered his chilling report, six armed men, friends of my father and my grandfather, entered the room, one after the other. The first was Uncle Plank, who was also the Guardian of our area; the others were his closest associates. My grandfather, completely ignoring the presence of the policemen, got to his feet and went over to Plank.

'By Holy Christ and all His blessed family!' said Plank, embracing my grandfather and shaking his hand warmly. 'Grandfather Boris, thank heaven no one has been hurt!'

'What is the world coming to, Plank? It seems we can't even sit quietly in our own homes!'

Plank started speaking to my grandfather as if he were summarizing what had happened, but his words were intended for the ears of the policemen:

'There's no need to despair, Grandfather Boris! We're all here with you, as we always are in times of happiness

and trouble . . . As you know, my dear friend, nobody can enter or leave our houses without our permission, especially if he has dishonest intentions . . .’

Plank went over to the table and embraced all the criminals, one by one. As he did so he kissed them on the cheeks and gave the typical Siberian greeting:

‘Peace and health to all brothers and honest men!’

They gave the reply that is prescribed by tradition:

‘Death and damnation to all cops and informers!’

The policemen could only stand and watch this moving ceremony. By now their rifles were drooping as low as their heads.

Plank’s assistants, communicating through the women present, told the policemen to get out.

‘Now I hope all the cops present will leave this house and never come back again. We’re holding their friends, whom we captured earlier; but once they’re out of the district we’ll let them leave in peace . . .’ Plank spoke in a calm, quiet voice, and if it hadn’t been for the content of his words, from his tone you might have thought he was telling a gentle, soothing story, like a fairy tale for children before they went to sleep.

Our friends formed a corridor with their bodies, along which the policemen began to file, one by one, hanging their heads.

I was elated; I wanted to dance, shout, sing and express some great emotion that I couldn’t yet understand. I felt I was part of, belonged to, a strong world, and it seemed as if all the strength of that world was inside me.

I don’t know how or why, but suddenly I jumped down from the bench and rushed into the main room, where the

red corner was. On the shelf, lying on a red handkerchief with golden embroidery, were the guns of my father, my uncle, my grandfather and our guests. Without thinking, I picked up my grandfather's magical Tokarev and ran back to the policemen, pointing it at them. I don't know what was going through my head at that moment; all I felt was a kind of euphoria. The policemen were walking slowly towards the door. I stopped in front of one of them and stared at him: his eyes were tired and seemed bloodshot; his expression was sad and desolate. I remember for a moment feeling as if all his hatred was concentrated on me. I aimed at his face; I tried as hard as I could to pull the trigger, but couldn't move it a millimetre. My hand grew heavier and heavier and I couldn't hold the pistol up high enough. My father burst out laughing, and called out to me:

'Come here at once, you young rascal! It's forbidden to shoot in the house, don't you know that?'

The policemen left, and a group of criminals followed them, escorting them to the boundary of the district; and then, when the escort came back, the second car, containing the policemen who were being held hostage, started off towards the town. But it was preceded by a car belonging to Plank's friends, who drove slowly to prevent the policemen from speeding up, so that the locals could insult them at their leisure, accompanying them out of the district in a kind of victory ceremony. Before they started off, someone had tied a washing line onto the back of their car with various things hanging on it: underpants, bras, small towels, dishcloths, and even one of my T-shirts, my father's contribution to the work of denigration. Scores of

people had come out of the houses to watch the sight of this washing line snaking its way along. The children ran along behind the car, trying to hit it with stones.

‘Look at those thieving cops! They come to Low River to steal our underpants!’ shouted one of the crowd, accompanying his comments with whistles and insults.

‘What do they want with them? The top officials in the government must have stopped giving their dogs a bone. They haven’t *got* any underpants!’

‘Where’s the harm, brothers, in being poor and not being able to afford a pair of underpants? If they come to us with honesty and like real men, with their faces uncovered, we’ll give every one of them a nice pair of Siberian underpants!’

Grandfather Chestnut had even brought an accordion from his house, and he played and sang as he walked along behind the car. Some women started dancing, as he bellowed an old Siberian song at the top of his voice, raising his head, adorned by a traditional eight-gored hat, and closing his eyes like a blind man:

Speak to me, sister Lena, and you too, brother Amur!¹
I’ve travelled the length and breadth of my land,
Robbing trains and making my rifle sing.
Only the old Tayga knows how many cops I’ve killed!

1. Lena and Amur are the names of two great Siberian rivers. Traditionally, criminal fortune is linked to these rivers: they are worshipped as deities, to whom you make offerings and whom you can ask for help in the course of your criminal activities. They are mentioned in many sayings, fairy tales, songs and poems. Of a fortunate criminal it is said that ‘his destiny is borne on the current of Lena’.

And now that I'm in trouble, help me Jesus Christ,
Help me hold my gun!
Now that the cops are everywhere, Mother Siberia,
Mother Siberia, save my life!

I too ran along and sang, constantly pushing up the peak of my own eight-gored hat, which was too big for me and kept slipping down over my eyes.

Next day, however, all my desire to sing melted away when my father gave me a good beating with his heavy hand. I had violated three sacred rules: I had picked up a weapon without the permission of an adult; I had taken it from the red corner, removing the cross that my grandfather had laid on top of it (only the person who puts the cross on top of a weapon can remove it); and lastly, I had tried to fire it in the house.

After that spanking from my father, my bottom and back were very sore, so, as always, I went to my grandfather for consolation. My grandfather looked serious, but the faint smile that flitted across his face told me that my problems, perhaps, weren't quite as bad as they seemed. He gave me a long lecture, the gist of which was that I had done something very silly. And when I asked him why the magic gun hadn't shot the policemen of its own accord, he told me that the magic only worked when the gun was used for an intelligent purpose, and with permission. At this point I began to suspect that my grandfather might not be telling me the whole truth,

because I wasn't convinced by this idea of a magic that only worked with adults' permission . . .

From that time on I stopped thinking about magic and started watching more closely the movements of my uncle's and my father's hands when they used their guns, and soon discovered the function of the safety catch.

In the Siberian community you learn to kill when you're very small. Our philosophy of life has a close relation to death; children are taught that taking someone else's life or dying are perfectly acceptable things, if there is a good reason. Teaching people how to die is impossible, because once you've died there is no coming back. But teaching people to live with the threat of death, to 'tempt' fate, is not difficult. Many Siberian fairy tales tell of the deadly clash between criminals and representatives of the government, of the risks people run every day with dignity and honesty, of the good fortune of those who in the end have got the loot and stayed alive, and of the 'good memory' that is preserved of those who have died without abandoning their friends in need. Through these fairy tales, the children perceive the values that give meaning to the Siberian criminals' lives: respect, courage, friendship, loyalty. By the time they are five or six, Siberian children show a determination and a seriousness that are enviable even to adults of other communities. It is on such solid foundations that the education to kill, to take physical action against another living being, is built.

From a very early age children are shown by their fathers how animals are killed in the yard: chickens, geese and pigs. In this way the child grows accustomed to blood, to the *details* of killing. Later, at the age of six or seven, the child is given the chance to kill a small animal himself. In this educative process there is no place for wrong emotions, such as sadism or cowardice. The child must be trained to have a full awareness of his own actions, and above all of the reasons and the profound meanings that lie behind those actions.

When a larger animal, such as a pig, an ox or a cow, is killed, the child is often allowed to practise on the carcass, so that he learns the right way to strike with a knife. My father often used to take my brother and me to a big butcher's shop, and teach us how to handle the knife, using the bodies of the pigs that hung from the hooks. A hand soon becomes decisive and expert, with so much practice.

When he is about ten, the child is a full member of the clan of the youths, which actively cooperates with the criminals of the Siberian community. There he has the chance to face many different situations of the criminal life for the first time. The older kids teach the younger ones how to behave and through the fights and quarrels and the handling of relations with the youths of other communities, each boy is broken in.

By the age of thirteen or fourteen, Siberian boys often have a criminal record, and therefore some experience of juvenile prison. This experience is seen as important, indeed fundamental, to the formation of the individual's character and view of the world. By that age many

Siberians already have some black marketeering and one murder, or at least attempted murder, to their name. And they all know how to communicate within the criminal community, how to follow, hand down and safeguard the founding principles of Siberian criminal law.

One day my father called me into the garden:

‘Come here, young rascal! And bring a knife with you!’

I picked up a kitchen knife, the one I generally used to kill geese and chickens, and ran out into the garden. My father, his friend, Uncle Aleksandr, known to everyone as ‘Bone’, and my Uncle Vitaly were sitting under a big old walnut tree. They were talking about pigeons, the passion of every Siberian criminal. Uncle Vitaly was holding a pigeon in his hands; he had opened its wing and was showing it to my father and Bone, explaining something.

‘Nikolay, son, go and kill a chicken and take it to your mother. Tell her to clean it and make some soup for this evening, because Uncle Bone is going stay here for a chat.’

A ‘chat’ involves the males of the family sitting together drinking and eating all night long to the point of exhaustion, till they collapse in a heap, one after another. When the males are having a chat, no one disturbs them; everyone goes about their own business, pretending the meeting doesn’t exist.

I ran to the chicken run at the end of the garden and grabbed the first chicken I could find. It was a normal

chicken, reddish in colour, fairly plump and perfectly calm. Holding it in both hands, I walked over to a nearby stump of wood, which we used for cutting off the heads of chickens like this one. It didn't try to escape and didn't seem concerned; it just looked around as if it were being taken on a guided tour. I grasped it around the neck and placed it on the stump, but when I raised the knife in the air to deliver the fatal blow, it started wriggling violently, until it managed to free itself from my hold, and give me a sharp peck on the head. I lost my balance and fell on my backside: I'd been defeated by a chicken. Looking up, I saw that my father and the others were watching the show. Uncle Vitaly was laughing, and Bone had a smile on his face too; but my father was more serious than ever – he had got to his feet and was coming towards me.

'Pick yourself up, killer! Give me that knife and I'll show you how it's done!' He walked towards the chicken, which in the meantime had started scratching a hole in the ground a few metres away. Once he was close to the chicken, my father arched his body, like a tiger poised to spring on its prey; the chicken was quite calm, and went on scratching at the earth for reasons known only to itself. Suddenly my father made a quick grab at it, but the chicken repeated its earlier action, and with a lightning-fast movement eluded my father's grasp and pecked him in the face, just under the eye.

'Damn it! He got me in the eye!' shouted my father, and my uncle and Bone got up from the bench under the walnut tree and ran towards him. But first Uncle Vitaly put the pigeon back in its cage, and then hung the cage up a few metres off the ground, to keep it away from our cat,

Murka, which loved killing pigeons, and always stayed near Uncle Vitaly, since he messed about with them all day long.

The men started making lunges at the chicken, which remained perfectly calm and deftly succeeded in dodging them every time. After a quarter of an hour of fruitless attempts the three men were out of breath and looked at the chicken, which went on scratching the earth and going about its chickenish business with the same determination as before. My father smiled at me, and said:

‘Let’s let it live, this chicken. We’ll never kill it; it can stay here, in the garden, free to do as it pleases.’

That evening I told my grandfather what had happened. He had a good laugh, then asked me if I agreed with my father’s decision. I answered him with a question:

‘Why free that chicken and not all the others?’

Grandfather looked at me with a smile and said:

‘Only someone who really appreciates life and freedom, and fights to the end, deserves to live in freedom . . . Even if he’s only a chicken.’

I thought about this for a while and then asked him:

‘What if all chickens become like him one day?’

After a long pause grandfather said:

‘Then we’ll have to get used to supper without chicken soup . . .’

The concept of freedom is sacred for the Siberians.

When I was six my Uncle Vitaly took me to see a friend of his whom I had never met, because he had been in

prison all my life. His name was Aleksandr, but my uncle called him 'Hedgehog'. The nickname, an affectionate term for a small, defenceless creature, had been coined when he was a baby and had stayed with him into adulthood.

Hedgehog had been released that very day, after fifteen years in prison. It was the custom among Siberians that the first people who went to visit a newly released prisoner should take children with them: it was a form of well-wishing, a lucky charm for his future life, free and criminal. The presence of children serves to demonstrate to people who have been excluded from society for a long time that their world still has a future, and that what they have done, their ideals and their criminal education, have not been, and never will be, forgotten. I, of course, understood nothing of this, and was simply curious to meet this character.

In our district there was always someone going to prison or coming out of it every day, so there was nothing strange to us children in seeing a man who had been in prison; we had been brought up to expect that we would go there ourselves sooner or later, and we were accustomed to talking about prison as something quite normal, just as other boys might talk about military service or what they're going to do when they grow up. But in some cases the characters of certain former prisoners took on a heroic stature in our stories – they became the models that we wanted to be like at all costs, we wanted to live their adventurous lives which shone with criminal glamour, those lives we heard the grown-ups discussing and which we then talked about among ourselves, often changing the details, making those stories

similar to fairy tales or fantasy adventures. That was what Hedgehog was: a legend, one of those figures our young imaginations had been nourished on. It was said that he was still a teenager when he had been accepted as a robber into one of the most famous gangs of our community, made up of old Siberian Authorities¹ and run by another legendary figure, known to everyone as 'Tayga'.

Tayga was a perfect example of a pure Siberian criminal: the son of criminal parents, as a small boy he had robbed armoured trains and killed a large number of policemen. There were many fabulous tales about him, which portrayed him as a wise and powerful criminal who was expert in the conduct of illegal activities, and yet was also very humble and kind, and always ready to help the weak and to punish every kind of injustice.

Tayga was already an old man when he met Hedgehog, who was then an orphan child. He had helped in his own way, teaching him the criminal law and morality, and very soon Hedgehog had become like a grandson to him. And Hedgehog had earned his respect.

Once Hedgehog had been surrounded by the police, with five other criminals. There was no way out – all the members of his gang were of the old Siberian faith, and so would never let themselves be taken alive. They would fight on till victory or death. Feeling sorry for him, since he was so young, his companions had suggested that he slip away, offering him a certain escape route, but he, out of respect for them, had refused. They were sure they were all going to be killed – the police siege was unrelenting – but then

1. 'Authority' refers to a leading criminal figure in the community. The nearest equivalent in American criminal vocabulary is a 'made man'.

Hedgehog had done something crafty. He had hidden his submachine gun behind his back, and with cries of fear had run out towards the police, begging them to help him, as if he were just a victim who had nothing to do with the confrontation between the criminals and the police. The cops had let him pass round behind their backs, and as soon as he got there he had pulled out his gun and mown them down. Thanks to his quick thinking the old men had been saved, and Hedgehog had become a regular member of their gang, with all the rights of an adult criminal. To us kids he was an inspiration: a teenager who is accepted as an equal among adults is a very rare phenomenon.

Later, when he was about thirty, Hedgehog had been sent to prison after attempting to murder a policeman. There had been no proof or witnesses, but he had been convicted on the lesser charge of ‘participation in a criminal group’; all that was needed to secure a conviction in this case was a couple of guns confiscated from his home and a few previous offences. By agreement with the police, the judge could hand down a sentence of as much as twenty-five years, with additional punitive conditions. Justice in the USSR was far from blind; in fact, at times it seemed to be examining us all through a microscope.

My uncle was a friend of Hedgehog’s; in prison they had been members of the same ‘family’: since my uncle had been released earlier than him, one day he had gone to the home of old Tayga, who by now was close to death, bearing the good wishes of his adopted grandson. Before he died Tayga had blessed my uncle and told him that the first male child to be born in our family must bear the

name of my great-grandfather, Nikolay, who had been his friend in his youth, and then had been shot by the police at the age of twenty-seven. The first male child to be born, five years later, was me.

Uncle Vitaly and I went on foot; it wasn't far – only half an hour's walk. Hedgehog had no home of his own; he was staying with an old criminal called 'Stew', who lived on the outskirts of our district, near the fields where the river made a wide bend and disappeared into the woods.

The gate was open. It was summer, and very hot; Stew and Hedgehog were sitting in the front yard, under a pergola of vines which provided pleasant shade. They were drinking kvas, a thirst-quenching drink made from black bread and yeast. The odour of kvas was very strong; you could smell it at once, on the still, warm air.

As soon as we entered, Hedgehog got up from his chair and hurried to meet my uncle: they embraced and kissed each other three times on the cheeks, as is the custom in our country.

'Well, you old wolf, can you still bite? Haven't the screws broken all your teeth?' Hedgehog asked, as if it were my uncle who had just been released from jail, not him.

But I knew why he had said it. My uncle had had a very nasty experience during his last year in prison. He had attacked a guard over a question of honour, to defend an old criminal who had been beaten up by a cop, and the guards had taken their revenge with some cruel tortures:

they had given him a long, severe beating, then drenched him with water and left him out in the open all night in the middle of winter. He had fallen ill. Fortunately he had survived, but his health had been permanently damaged – he had chronic asthma and one of his lungs was rotting away. My grandfather always used to joke that he had only retrieved half of his son from prison: the other half had stayed inside to rot forever.

‘You’re not so young yourself! What an ugly old sod you’ve turned out to be! Whatever happened to the best years of your life?’ my uncle had replied, looking at him affectionately. It was clear the two men were good friends.

‘Who’s this young rascal? He’s not Yuri’s son, is he?’ Hedgehog stared at me with a crooked smile.

‘Yes, this is my nephew. We called him Nikolay, according to the wishes of old Tayga, may the earth lie as light as a feather upon him . . .’

Hedgehog bent over me, his face in front of mine. He looked closely into my eyes, and I looked at him. His eyes were very pale, almost white, with a faint trace of blue; they didn’t seem human. They fascinated me, and I kept staring at them as if they might change colour at any moment.

Then Hedgehog put his hand on my head and ruffled my hair, and I smiled at him as if he were a member of my family.

‘He’s going to be a killer, this one. He’s a true member of our race, may the Lord help him.’

‘He’s a clever lad . . .’ said my uncle, with a strong note of pride in his voice. ‘Kolima, boy, recite the poem

about the drowned man to Uncle Hedgehog and Uncle Stew!’

It was Uncle Vitaly’s favourite poem. Whenever he got drunk and wanted to go out and kill some cops, my grandparents, in order to stop him, would send me to recite that poem to him, as a kind of therapy. I would start to recite, and he would at once calm down, saying:

‘All right, never mind, I’ll kill those bastards tomorrow. Let’s hear it again . . .’ So I would recite the poem over and over again, till he fell asleep. Only then did my grandparents come into the room and take away his gun.

It was a poem by the legendary Pushkin. It’s about a poor fisherman who finds the body of a drowned man caught in his nets. For fear of the consequences he throws the body back into the water, but the ghost of the drowned man starts visiting him every night. Until his body is buried in the ground below a cross, his spirit will never be able to rest in peace.

It was a wonderful story, but also a terrifying one. I don’t know why my uncle liked it so much.

I wasn’t shy about reciting poems in front of others, in fact I enjoyed it; it made me feel important, the centre of attention. So I filled my lungs and began to speak, trying to sound as impressive as possible, varying my tone and emphasizing my words with gestures:

‘The children came into the house, and hurriedly called their father: “Father, Father! Our nets have caught a dead man!” “What are you talking about, you little devils?” replied the father. “Oh, these children! I’ll give you “dead man” . . . Wife, give me my coat, I’m going

to see. Well, where is this dead man?” “There he is, Father!” And sure enough, there on the river bank, where the net had been laid out to dry, there was a corpse on the sand: a horrible, disfigured body, bluish and bloated . . .’

When I had finished, they applauded me. My uncle was the most delighted of all; he stroked my head, saying:

‘What did I tell you? He’s a genius.’

Old Stew asked us to sit down at the table under the pergola and went to fetch two glasses for us.

Hedgehog asked me:

‘Tell me, Kolima, have you got a pike?’

At the word ‘pike’ my eyes started shining and I became as attentive as a tiger out hunting – I had never owned a pike, nor had any of my friends. Boys usually get one later, when they’re ten or twelve years old.

The pike, as the traditional weapon of the Siberian criminals is called, is a flick-knife with a long, thin blade, and is connected with many old customs and ceremonies of our community.

A pike cannot be bought. It has to be earned.

Any young criminal can be given a pike by an adult criminal, as long as he is not a relative. Once it has been given, the pike becomes a kind of personal cult symbol, like the cross in the Christian community.

The pike also has magic powers, lots of them.

When someone is ill, and especially when he is suffering extreme pain, they put an open pike under his mattress, with the blade sticking out, so that, according to the beliefs, the blade cuts the pain and absorbs it like a sponge. What’s more, when an enemy is struck by that

blade, the pain collected inside it flows out into the wound, making him suffer even more.

The umbilical cord of newborn babies is cut with a pike, which must first have been left open overnight in a place where cats sleep.

To seal important pacts between two people – truces, friendships or brotherhoods – both criminals cut their hands with the same pike, which is then kept by a third person, who is a kind of witness to their pact: if either of them betrays the agreement he will be killed with that knife.

When a criminal dies, his pike is broken by one of his friends. One part, the blade, is put in his grave, usually under the dead man's head, while the haft is preserved by his closest relatives. When it is necessary to communicate with the dead man, to ask for advice or a miracle, the relatives take out the haft and put it in the red corner, below the icons. In this way the dead man becomes a kind of bridge between the living and God.

A pike keeps its powers only if it is in the hands of a Siberian criminal who uses it respecting the rules of the criminal community. If an unworthy person takes possession of a knife that does not belong to him, it will bring him bad luck – hence our idiom, 'to ruin something as a pike ruins a bad master'.

When a criminal is in danger, his pike can warn him in many ways: the blade may suddenly open of its own accord, or become hot, or vibrate. Some think it can even emit a whistle.

If a pike is broken, it means that somewhere there is a dead person who cannot find peace, so offerings are made

to the icon, or dead relatives and friends are remembered in prayers, visits are made to graveyards, and the dead are remembered by talking about them in the family and telling stories about them, especially to children.

For all these reasons, at the word ‘pike’ my eyes lit up. To possess one is to be rewarded by adults, to have something that will bind you to their world forever.

The question Hedgehog had asked me was a clear sign that something incredible was about to happen to me – to me, a six-year-old boy. A legendary criminal was going to give me a pike, my first pike. I had never hoped, never even imagined anything like this, and yet suddenly, there before me was the chance to possess that sacred symbol, which for people who have received the Siberian criminal education is a part of the soul.

I tried to hide my excitement and look indifferent, but I don’t think I was very successful, because all three of them were looking at me with smiles on their faces. No doubt they were thinking of their own first pike.

‘No, I haven’t,’ I said in a very hard voice.

‘Well, wait a minute and I’ll be right back . . .’ With these words Hedgehog went into the house. I was exploding with happiness; inside me a band was playing, fireworks were going off and billions of voices were shouting with joy.

Hedgehog came back straight away. He came over to me, took my hand and placed in it a pike. *The* pike.

‘This is yours. May the Lord help you and your hand grow strong and sure . . .’

From the way he looked at me, it was clear that he was happy too.

I looked at my pike and couldn't believe it was real. It was heavier and bigger than I had imagined.

I released the safety catch by lowering a little lever, and then pressed the button. The sound of the knife opening was music to my ears; it was as if the metal had given voice. The blade flicked out sharply, in a split second, with immense force, and at once remained firm and straight, steady and fixed. It was shocking: this strange object, which when closed had seemed like some sort of writing implement from the turn of the century, was now a beautiful, graceful weapon, with a certain nobility and allure.

The haft was made of black bone – that's what we call the antlers of the red deer, which are dark brown, almost black – with an inlay of white bone, in the form of an Orthodox cross, in the middle. And it was so long I had to hold it with both hands, like the sword of the medieval knights. The blade, too, was very long, sharp on one side and polished till it gleamed. It was a fantastic weapon and I felt as if I were in heaven.

From that day on, my authority among my friends shot up. For a week I received visits from swarms of little boys who came from all over the district to see my pike; my house had become a kind of sacred shrine, and they were the pilgrims. My grandfather would let them into the yard and offer everyone cold drinks. My grandmother would hardly have time to make some kvas before it was all gone, so I spread the word that anyone who wanted to come

and see the first six-year-old boy to be the proud owner of a *real* pike had to bring something to drink with him.

I was very flattered and proud of myself, but after a while a strange form of depression came over me; I was tired of telling the same story a hundred times a day and showing the pike to everyone. So I went to see Grandfather Kuzya, as I did whenever I had a problem or felt depressed.

Grandfather Kuzya was an elderly criminal who lived in our district in a small house by the river. He was a very strong old man; he still had a full head of black hair and was covered all over with tattoos, even on his face. Usually he took me into the garden to show me the river, and told me fairy tales and various stories about the criminal community. He had a powerful voice, but spoke in a quiet, languid way, so that his voice seemed to be coming from far away, not from inside him. Down the left side of his wrinkled face ran a long scar, a souvenir of his criminal youth. But the most striking thing about him was his eyes. They were blue, but a dirty, muddy blue, with a hint of green; they seemed not to belong to his body, not to be part of it. They were deep, and when he turned them on you, calmly and without agitation, it was as if they were X-raying you – there was something really hypnotic about his gaze.

Well, I went to see him and told him the whole story, making it clear that I was pleased to have the pike, but that my friends treated me differently from before. Even my good friend Mel, who was ‘hewn with the same axe’ as me, as we say, behaved as if I were some kind of religious icon.

Grandfather Kuzya laughed, but not unkindly, and told me I clearly wasn't cut out to be a celebrity. Then he gave me one of his long lectures. He advised me to do whatever came naturally. He told me that the fact of having a pike didn't make me different from the others, that I had simply been lucky to be in the right place at the right time, and that if Our Lord had so willed it I must be ready for the responsibility he had given me. After his talk, as always, I felt better.

Grandfather Kuzya taught me the old rules of criminal behaviour, which in recent times he had seen change before his very eyes. He was worried, because, he said, these things always began with small details which seemed to be trivial, but the end result was a total loss of identity. To help me understand this he often told me a Siberian fairy tale, a kind of metaphor, designed to show how men who lead the wrong kind of life because they are led astray end up losing their dignity.

The tale was about a pack of wolves who were in trouble because they had had nothing to eat for ages. The old wolf who was the leader of the pack tried to reassure his companions – he asked them to be patient and to wait, because sooner or later herds of wild boar or deer would come along, and then they would be able to hunt to their hearts' content and would at last fill their stomachs. One young wolf, however, was not prepared to wait, and started looking for a quick solution to the problem. He decided to leave the woods and go to ask men for food. The old wolf tried to stop him. He said that if he accepted food from men he would change and would no longer be a wolf. But the young wolf wouldn't listen. He replied

bluntly that if you needed to fill your stomach it was pointless to follow strict rules – the important thing was to fill it. And off he went towards the village.

The men fed him on their leftovers whenever he asked. But every time the young wolf filled his stomach and thought of going back to the woods to join the others he would get drowsy. So he put off his return until eventually he completely forgot the life of the pack, the pleasure of the hunt and the excitement of sharing the prey with his companions.

He began to go hunting with the men, to help them, instead of the wolves with whom he had been born and raised. One day, during the hunt, a man shot an old wolf, which fell to the ground, wounded. The young wolf ran towards him to take him back to his master, and while he was trying to get hold of him with his teeth he realized that it was his old pack leader. He felt ashamed, and didn't know what to say. It was the old wolf who filled the silence with his last words:

'I have lived my life like a worthy wolf, I have hunted a lot and shared many prey with my brothers, so now I die happy. But you will live your life in shame, and alone, in a world to which you do not belong, for you have rejected the dignity of a free wolf to have a full stomach. You have become unworthy. Wherever you go, you will be treated with contempt; you belong neither to the world of wolves nor to that of men . . . This will teach you that hunger comes and goes, but dignity, once lost, never returns.'

That concluding speech was my favourite part of the story, because the old wolf's words were a true distillation

of our criminal philosophy, and as Grandfather Kuzya spoke those words he reflected in them his own experience, his way of seeing and understanding the world.

The words returned to my mind a few years later, when a train was taking me to a juvenile prison. A guard decided to hand round some pieces of salami. We were hungry, and many threw themselves greedily on that salami to devour it. I refused it; a boy asked me why and I told him the story of the unworthy wolf. He didn't understand me, but when we reached our destination the guard who had distributed the salami announced in the main yard, in front of everyone, that before giving it to us he had dipped it in the toilet.

As a result, according to the criminal rule, all those who had eaten it had been 'tainted' and had therefore fallen to the lowest caste of the criminal community, and would automatically be despised by all, even before they got into the prison. This was one of the tricks the cops often played, to use the criminal rules as a weapon against the criminals themselves. These tricks were most successful with youngsters, who often didn't know that an honest criminal is not allowed to accept anything from a cop. As my late lamented uncle used to say:

'The only thing a worthy criminal takes from the cops is a beating, and even that he gives back, when the right moment comes.'

So, thanks to the sudden increase in my authority among my friends, I had begun to do a bit of advertising for the

upbringing and education I'd received from Grandfather Kuzya. He was delighted, because this enabled him to influence all of us. And now we boys of the Low River district became known as 'Siberian Education' – a name that had been given to the Siberians in exile because of their loyalty to the criminal traditions and their extremely conservative spirit.

In our town every criminal community, especially if it was made up of young people, distinguished itself from the others by its clothes or how its members wore them. They also used symbols, which immediately identified you as belonging to a specific gang, district or national group. Many communities used to mark out their territory with drawings or slogans, but our elders had always forbidden us to write or draw anything on the walls, because they said it was shameful and ill-mannered. Grandfather Kuzya had once explained to me that our criminal community had no need to affirm its presence in any way: it simply existed, and people knew that, not because they saw graffiti on the walls of their homes, but because they felt our presence, and were sure they could always count on the help and understanding of us criminals. The same went for an individual criminal: even if he were a legendary character, he should behave as the humblest of all.

In other districts it was completely different. The members of the gangs of Centre wore gold pendants of their own design. For example, members of the gang led by a young criminal nicknamed 'Pirate', who had built up a kind of personality cult around himself, distinguished themselves by wearing a pendant bearing the skull and crossbones of a pirates' flag. Another gang, from

the Railway district, made all its members wear black, to emphasize their loyalty to the Black Seed caste. The Ukrainians of the Balka district, on the other hand, dressed in the American style, or more often like African-Americans. They sang songs which seemed meaningless, and they drew strange things all over the place with spray-cans. One of them had once drawn something in the Bank district on the wall of an elder, a former prisoner, and in revenge a young criminal, who was a neighbour of the old man, had shot him.

I remember commenting on this to Grandfather Kuzya. I said that in my opinion killing was unjust. You could demand compensation for the insult and the nuisance, and then you could always beat the guy up – a good thrashing will usually get a bit of sense into a guy's head. But Grandfather didn't agree with me and said I was too humane – too humane and too young. He explained to me that when boys went down a wrong road and wouldn't listen to their elders, in most cases they harmed themselves and those around them. The Ukrainian boys were putting at risk many youngsters of other districts, who would imitate them, because being ill-mannered was always easier and more attractive than following the road of good manners. Therefore it was necessary to treat them with cruelty and absolute severity, to make everyone understand where the path of disobedience to the traditions could lead. He added:

'Anyway, why do they pretend to be American blacks and not, say, North Koreans or Palestinians? I'll tell you why: this is filth that comes from the devil, through the television, the cinema, the newspapers and all the trash

that a worthy and honest person never touches . . . America is a cursed, godforsaken country, and everything that emanates from it must be ignored. If these fools play at being Americans, soon they'll be whooping like monkeys instead of talking . . .'

Grandfather Kuzya hated everything American because, like all Siberian criminals, he opposed what represented power in the world. If he heard anyone talk about people who had fled to America, of many Jews who had made a mass exodus from the USSR in the 1980s, he would say in amazement:

'Why on earth does everyone go to America, saying they seek freedom? Our ancestors took refuge in the woods, in Siberia, they didn't go to America. And besides, why flee from the Soviet regime, only to end up in the American one? It would be like a bird that had escaped from its cage going voluntarily to live in another cage . . .'

For these reasons, in Low River it was forbidden to use anything American. The American cars which circulated freely all over town couldn't enter our district, and items of clothing, domestic appliances and all other objects that were 'made in the USA' were banned. For me personally this rule was rather painful, since I was very keen on jeans but I couldn't wear them. I secretly listened to American music – I liked blues, rock and heavy metal, but I was taking a big risk in keeping the records and cassettes in the house. And when my father carried out an inspection of my hiding places and finally found them, all hell would break loose. He would beat me and make me break all the records with my own hands in front of him and my

grandfather, and then every evening for a week I would be made to play Russian tunes on the accordion for an hour and sing Russian folk or criminal songs.

I wasn't attracted by American politics, only by the music and by the books of some writers. Once, choosing the right moment, I tried to explain this to Grandfather Kuzya. I hoped that he would be able to intercede and give me permission to listen to the music and read American books without having to hide from my family. He looked at me as if I had betrayed him and said:

'Son, do you know why when there's an outbreak of the plague people burn everything that belonged to the victims?'

I shook my head. But I already imagined where this was leading.

He gave a sad sigh and concluded:

'The contagion, Nikolay, the contagion.'

And so, since everything American was forbidden, just as it was forbidden to flaunt wealth and power through material things, the people of our district dressed very humbly. We boys were in a terrible state as far as clothing was concerned, but we were proud of it. We wore like trophies our fathers' or elder brothers' old shoes, and their unfashionable clothes, which were meant to emphasize Siberian humility and simplicity.

We could have enjoyed life to the full. We were an ancient and very wealthy community, the houses in our area were huge, the people could have lived 'in grand

style', as the phrase is in our country and in yours, but instead money was used in a strange way: no clothes, jewels, expensive cars, gambling. There were only two things the Siberians were happy to spend their money on: weapons and Orthodox icons. We all had an enormous quantity of weapons, and also of icons, which were very costly.

In all other respects we were humble – humble and in uniform. In winter we all wore quilted trousers – black or dark blue, very warm and comfortable. The jackets were of two kinds: either the classic quilted *fufayka*, which half the population wore in the days of the USSR, because it was the jacket that was given to workers, or the *tulup*, which had an enormous fur collar that you could pull right up to your eyes to protect yourself against the harshest cold. I wore the *fufayka*, because it was lighter and allowed me to move fairly freely. The shoes were heavy, and fur-lined, and there were also long woollen socks to ward off frostbite. On your head you'd wear a fur hat: I had a lovely one, made of white ermine – very warm, light and comfortable.

In summer we wore ordinary flannel trousers, always with a belt, in accordance with the Siberian rule. The belt is connected with the tradition of the hunters, for whom it was much more than a lucky charm: it was a request for help. If a hunter got lost in the woods, or had an accident, he would tie his belt round the neck of his dog and send it home. When the others saw the dog return, they would know he was in trouble. With the trousers we wore a shirt – usually white or grey, with a straight collar and with the buttons on the right – called *kosovorotka*, 'crooked collar'. Over the shirt we wore light jackets,

grey or black, and very coarse, of military issue. The last item of our summer outfit was the legendary hat of the Siberian criminals, a kind of national symbol, known as 'eight triangles'. It consists of eight triangular segments of cloth sewn together to form a domed cap with a button on top; it also has a short peak. The colour must always be pale, or even white. In Russia this kind of hat is called a *kepka*, and there are many varieties. 'Eight triangles' is only the Siberian version. The real eight triangles of a bold and cunning criminal must have the peak bent well back, and rounded, not broken, so as to form a ridge in the middle. As a sign of contempt you break your enemy's peak, bending it till it goes out of shape.

My eight triangles had been a present from my uncle; it was an old hat and I liked it for that very reason.

The eight triangles was such an important hat that it generated stories and idioms. In criminal slang the phrase 'to wear eight triangles' means to commit a crime or to participate in the organizing of criminal activities. The phrase 'to keep eight triangles up' means to be on the alert, to be worried about some danger. 'To put eight triangles on the back of your head' means to behave aggressively, to prepare for an attack. 'To wear eight triangles askew' means to show calm, relaxed behaviour. 'To tip eight triangles over your eyes' means to announce the need to disappear, to hide. 'To fill eight triangles' means to take something in abundance.

Often I really did fill my hat, for example when we boys went to see Aunt Marta, a woman who lived alone on the river bank and was famous for her jams. We used to take her the apples we had stolen from the collective

farms on the other side of the river, and help her peel them, so she could make the jam. She would bake the *pirozinki*, little biscuits she filled with jam. We would all sit in a circle on little stools in the yard in front of her house, with the kitchen door wide open, through which we could always see something boiling on the fire; we would fish the apples out of the bags, peel them with our knives and then throw them into a big pot with water in it. When it was full, we would carry it into the house, using two long planks of wood which we hooked onto the pot like handles. Aunt Marta was very fond of us. She gave us plenty to eat – we would always go home with full stomachs and with *pirozinki* in our hands. I used to put mine in my hat and eat them as I walked.

The eight-gored hat is the subject of many proverbs, poems and songs of the criminal tradition. Since I used to spend a lot of time with the old criminals, listening to them sing or recite poems, I knew many of them by heart. One song, my favourite, went like this:

I remember I wore an eight-gored hat,
 Drank beer and smoked strong tobacco;
 I was in love with my neighbour Nina
 And together we'd go to the restaurant.
 I wore a *shaber*¹ in my squeaking *kromachy*,²
 Under my shirt a *telnyashka*,³
 A gift from the thieves of Odessa . . .

1. A knife modelled on the military bayonet, used in attacking ships on the rivers.

2. Literally 'polished ones': *kromachy* was our word for boots.

3. A sailor's vest, with blue and white stripes and long sleeves.

The eight triangles was at the centre of everything: it was constantly being mentioned, and people would bet on it in various situations. Often in conversations between criminals, both children and adults, you would hear the phrase: 'May my eight-gored hat catch fire on my head if what I say is not true', or 'May my hat fly off my head', or the more gruesome variant, 'May my hat choke me to death'.

In our society swearing oaths was forbidden; it was considered a kind of weakness, an insult to yourself, because a person who swears implies that what he is saying is not true. But among us boys, when we talked, oaths would often slip out, and we would swear by our hats. You could never swear by your mother, your parents or relatives in general, by God or by the saints. Nor by your health, or even worse by your soul, for that was considered to be 'damaging God's property'. So the only thing left to take it out on was your hat.

Once my friend Mel swore by his hat that he would 'stuff his eight triangles up Amur's arse' (Amur was a dog that belonged to Uncle Plague, a neighbour of ours) if he didn't jump clean over the school gate from a standing position.

Even thinking about it today I've no idea how Mel thought he could jump over a gate over four metres high. But what worried me more at the time was how he would carry out the operation if he lost the bet, since Amur was the biggest and nastiest dog in our area. I was petrified by that monster; once I had seen him swim across the river

and kill a goat, tearing it apart as if it were made of rags. He was a cross between a German shepherd and the breed which in our homeland, Siberia, is called Alabay, 'wolf-crusher'. Usually Amur roamed quietly around his owner's yard, but sometimes he became uncontrollable, especially if he heard the sound of a whistle. He had already been shot on two occasions, after attacking someone, but had survived because, as my father used to say, 'the more you shoot that dog, the stronger it gets'.

Well, Mel's idea seemed to me more than stupid. But once spoken, his word couldn't be taken back, and it only remained to witness that insane show, in which Mel, through his own pure idiocy, was both stage manager and actor.

So we headed for the school gate.

Mel made one attempt; he jumped half a metre, hitting his nose against the gate. Then, sitting on the ground, he drew his conclusions:

'Shit, it's really high! I'll never make it . . .'

I looked at him and couldn't believe how he could be so naive. Trying to save the situation, I said it had all been great fun and now we might as well go home. But Mel astounded me with his stupidity, saying that as a question of honour he had to keep his oath.

I felt like laughing and crying at the same time. But my other two friends, Besa and Gigit, were enthusiastic, and were already imagining all the ways in which Mel could most effectively creep up to the dog and carry out his devilish plan.

When we reached Plague's house, Mel climbed up onto the fence and jumped down into the yard. Plague

wasn't at home; he had gone fishing – the net that was usually hung along the fence wasn't there.

Amur was lying by the gate with a slightly ironic expression on his horrendously ugly face.

Mel had brought a rope to tie the dog up, and he also had a tube of Vaseline which some friends had got from Aunt Natalia, the nurse. Mel approached him and Amur didn't move a muscle – he gazed at him with bored and indifferent eyes, as if he were looking straight through him. With every step Mel gained more courage until, when there were no more than a couple of metres between Mel and Amur, Gigit stuck two fingers in his mouth and gave a loud whistle, making such a piercing sound that it even startled me. A few seconds later I saw Mel fly magically over the fence, pass above my head and land on the pavement, hitting his forehead on the sun-softened asphalt. Immediately afterwards the gate jerked under the weight of Amur, who threw himself into it, with a strange noise that I had never before heard from any living creature. It was a kind of human cry mingled with a desperate and angry chorus of animal voices. As if an elephant, a lion, a wolf, a bear and a horse were competing at who could make the loudest noise. If someone had asked me at that moment what the voice of the devil might sound like, I would have said like Amur.

The seat of Mel's pants was torn, and underneath you could see some bloody red weals, left by a blow from Amur's paw. Mel was terrified and still couldn't understand what had happened. Gigit and Besa were rolling about with laughter and kept whistling, to increase the fury of the dog, which from the other side of the gate

kept spitting froth and uttering the sounds of his animal wrath.

And so in the end Mel lost his bet, but after the entertaining show he had provided we forgave him.

At the age of twelve I got into trouble. I was put on trial for ‘threats in a public place’, ‘attempted murder with serious consequences’ and, naturally, ‘resistance to a representative of power in the pursuance of his duties of defending the public order’. It was my first criminal trial, and in view of the circumstances (I was a young boy and the victim was a previous offender a couple of years older than me) the judge decided to be lenient and give me a sentence which in slang is called a ‘cuddle’. No prison and no obligation to follow any re-education programmes, after which most convicts usually become even nastier and angrier. All I had to do was observe a kind of personal curfew: stay at home from eight in the evening till eight in the morning, report to the juvenile office every week and attend school.

I would have to live like that for a year and a half, then I would be able to return to normal life. But if in the meantime I committed some crime I would land myself straight on the bunk beds of a juvenile prison, or at least in a re-education camp.

For a year everything went smoothly, I tried to keep as far as possible away from trouble. Certainly, I often went out at night, because I was sure I wouldn’t be discovered, but the important thing, I told myself, was not to let myself

get caught in a place far from home at the wrong time and above all not to be found mixed up in some serious crime.

But one afternoon Mel and three other friends came round to see me. We got together in the garden, on the bench under the tree, to discuss an incident that had occurred a week earlier with a group of boys from Tiraspol. We had a friend, a boy who had recently moved to our district. His family had been forced to leave St Petersburg because the father had had problems with the police. They were Jews, but in view of the special circumstances, and some business they had done together, the Siberians had guaranteed their protection.

Our friend was thirteen and was called Lyoza, an old Jewish name. He was a very quiet, weak boy: he had health problems, was almost deaf and wore enormous glasses, so in the Siberian community he was immediately treated with compassion and understanding, like all disabled people. My father, for example, never stopped reminding me to look after him and to get out my knife should anyone attack or insult him. Lyoza was very well-educated, had refined manners and always talked seriously – everything he said seemed convincing. So we had immediately given him an appropriate nickname: ‘the Banker’.

Lyoza always went around with us. He never carried knives or other weapons and wasn’t even capable of using his fists, but he knew everything, he was a kind of living encyclopaedia, he was always telling us the stories you find in books: how insects live and multiply, how the gills of fish are formed, why birds migrate, and things like that. I remember once he managed to do the impossible

– explain to Mel how hermaphrodite worms reproduce. It took him a long time, but in the end he succeeded; Mel wandered around in a daze, as if he'd seen Jesus, God the Father and the Madonna all at once.

'Wow, what a story! Worms don't have a family! They have no father and mother! They do everything on their own!' Getting my friend Mel to understand anything, even the tiniest thing, was proof of great human and intellectual qualities.

Mel and my other three friends, Besa, Gigit and Grave, told me that Lyoza had gone on his own to Tiraspol, to the second-hand market, to exchange some stamps, because he was a keen collector. During the return journey, on the coach, he had been attacked by a bunch of thugs who had hit him and stolen his stamp album. I was furious, so we arranged to meet the other kids of our district to make an expedition to Tiraspol.

Tiraspol is the capital of Transnistria; it is about twenty kilometres away, on the opposite side of the river. It is a much larger town than ours, and very different. The people of Tiraspol kept out of crime; there were a lot of munitions factories, military barracks and various offices, so the inhabitants were all workers or soldiers. We had a very bad relationship with the kids of that town; we called them 'mama's boys', 'billy goats' and 'ball-less wonders'. In Tiraspol the criminal rules of honesty and respect among people did not apply, and the youngsters behaved like real animals. So none of us was surprised at what had happened to Lyoza.

We went to Lyoza's house to see how he was and to ask him if he would come with us to help us identify the

assailants. We explained to his father that we were going to Tiraspol to carry out an act of justice, to punish those who had attacked his son. His father gave him permission to go with us and wished us all good luck; he was very pleased that Lyoza had friends like us, because he profoundly respected the Siberian philosophy of loyalty to the group.

Lyoza said nothing; he fetched his jacket and came out with us. Together we returned to my house, where we planned everything.

At about eight in the evening thirty-odd friends gathered outside. My mother at once understood that we were planning some mischief.

‘Perhaps it would be better if you kept calm. Can’t you stay at home?’

What could I say in reply?

‘Don’t worry, mama, we’re just going for a quick trip, then we’ll come back . . .’

Poor Mama, she never dared to oppose my decisions, but suffered in silence.

We set out for a park on the outskirts, where all the thugs of the town gathered in the evening. It was called ‘the Polygon’. There the kids used to ride around on scooters, barbecue meat and consume huge quantities of alcohol and drugs until late at night.

So as not to attract attention we arrived in town on the regular coach, and then, splitting up into groups of five, set off on foot towards the park.

My friend Mel showed me a five-shooter revolver, an old, small-bore weapon, which I called affectionately ‘the prehistoric’.

‘I’ll let them see her this evening,’ he said with a broad grin, and it was clear that he couldn’t wait to do something nasty.

‘Holy Christ, Mel, we’re not going to war! Hide that crap, I don’t even want to see it . . .’ I really didn’t like the idea of drawing our guns. Partly because according to our education a firearm is used only in extreme cases, but mainly because if word gets around that you grab your pistol at the first opportunity, people start criticizing you. Ever since I was small I learned from my uncle that your gun is like your wallet: you only take it out to use it, all the rest is stupid.

But Mel tried to convince me that his behaviour made sense.

‘But it’s dangerous to go there without one; goodness knows how many guns they’re carrying, they’re prepared . . .’

‘Yeah, I can just imagine how prepared they are, all high as kites, and with holes in their veins . . . By the Passion of Christ, Mel, they’re all drunks or junkies, they shit themselves when they see their own shadows, aren’t you ashamed to pull out your gun in front of them?’

‘Oh all right, I won’t use it, but I’ll keep it ready, and if the situation gets out of hand . . .’

I looked at him as if he were mentally ill; it was impossible to explain anything to him. ‘Mel, I swear to you, the only person who can make the situation get out of hand this evening is you, with your fucking pistol! If I see you use it, don’t bother to try speaking to me ever again,’ I snapped.

‘All right, Kolima, don’t be angry, I won’t use it, if you don’t want me to. But remember, everyone is free to do what he wants . . .’ My friend was trying to teach me our law.

‘Oh, sure, everyone’s free to do what he wants when he’s on his own, but when he’s with the others he has to toe the line, so stop arguing . . .’ I was always keen to have the last word, with Mel – that was my only hope of getting it into his head.

When we reached the park, the group assembled. The only ‘principals’ – that is, those who were responsible for the kids – were me and Yuri, known as ‘Gagarin’, who was three years older than me. We had to decide how to go about identifying Lyoza’s assailants with precision, and how to get them to come out into the open.

‘Let’s take a couple of them – any two, at random – and threaten to kill them if the attackers don’t show themselves!’ proposed Besa, who in matters of strategy behaved like a tank, flattening everything in his path.

‘And you know what would happen? In three seconds they’d all run away and we’d be left with two spaced-out idiots who had nothing to do with it . . .’

I had a plan to propose, but I wanted to do it delicately, because to my way of thinking, its success depended entirely on Lyoza.

‘Listen, guys, I’ve got an idea that will definitely work, but it needs one person’s courage. Yours, Lyoza. It needs you to show your balls.’ I looked at him. He seemed exactly what he was: a kid who had nothing to do with our gang. With his perfectly buttoned jacket, his thick lenses that made him look like a monster and

his hair cut in the manner of the actors of the 1950s, he looked completely out of place. Lyoza came closer to me, so as better to hear what I was about to say. 'You've got to go there on your own: that way those bastards will see you and show themselves. We'll surround the area and stand behind the trees, ready to act . . . As soon as you recognize them, shout, whistle, and we'll jump on them in a flash. The rest is already in the hands of the Lord . . .'

'Not bad, Kolima. Good plan, if Lyoza agrees,' said Gagarin, looking at Lyoza to see how he would react.

Lyoza adjusted his glasses on his nose, and in a resolute voice he said:

'Sure I agree. Only afterwards, when the fighting starts, I don't know what to do; I don't think I'll be able to hit anyone, I've never done it in my whole life . . .'

I was impressed by the dignity with which the boy told the truth about himself. He wasn't afraid at all, he was just explaining the facts, and my respect for him grew.

'When we jump out from the trees you hide behind them; Besa will keep close to you in case anyone tries to get at you.' Gagarin made a gesture to Besa, pointing two fingers at his eyes and then at Lyoza. 'Not one hair must fall from his head!'

We headed for the centre of the park. We kept in the dark and avoided the main avenue. We reached the trees behind which there was an asphalted space with benches arranged in a circle, under the dirty yellow light from three lamp posts. The Polygon.

There was the sound of music; we could see the kids sitting on the benches, on the ground, on their scooters.

There were about fifty of them, including some girls. The atmosphere was very relaxed.

We split up into six groups and surrounded the area. At the right moment I nudged Lyoza with my shoulder:

‘Go on, little brother, let’s show them nobody messes around with the boys of Low River . . .’

He nodded and set off towards the enemy camp.

As soon as Lyoza came out into the open, there was a flurry of movement among those present. Some got up from the benches and peered at him curiously, others laughed, pointing at him. One girl screamed like a mad thing, laughing and sobbing at the same time. She was obviously drunk. Her voice immediately disgusted me. She sounded like an adult alcoholic, her voice ruined by smoking, very coarse and unfeminine:

‘Look, Whisker! There’s that fairy from the coach! He’s returned to get his stamps!’

The girl couldn’t pronounce her ‘r’s properly, so her speech sounded faintly comical.

We all listened attentively, ready to spring into action as soon as we identified the guy she’d spoken to. He didn’t keep us waiting long. From a nearby bench, crammed with girls, a boy who had been strumming a guitar got up and, putting down the instrument, walked towards Lyoza with a light, theatrical step, throwing his arms apart as you might to welcome an old friend.

‘Well, look who’s here! You little bastard! Have you decided to commit suicide this evening? . . .’ He didn’t manage to say any more, because out of the darkness appeared the figure of Gigit, who leaped on him like a tiger and knocked him to the ground, giving him a rapid

succession of violent kicks in the face. I too jumped out from the trees; in a second we were all on the square and surrounded our enemies.

Panic spread among them – some rushed first one way and then the other, trying to escape, but as soon as they came up against one of us they retreated. Then a group of more determined guys broke away from the rest and the fight really began.

I saw a lot of knives flash, and I too took out my pike. Gigit came close to me, and shoulder to shoulder we advanced, striking out in all directions and dodging the few attacks that came towards us.

A lot of them, seizing their chance, started running away. The girl who had screamed was so drunk she'd fallen down as she ran, and one of her friends trampled on her head – I heard her cry out and then saw the blood on her hair.

In the end we were left against about twenty of them and, as they say in our language, we 'gave them a good combing': none of them was left standing, they were all on the ground, many had cuts on their faces or their legs, some had their knee ligaments sliced through.

Mel marked the end of the fight with a flourish. Shouting like an enraged monster and making strange contortions with his hideous face, he picked up a scooter which was resting peacefully on its stand, raised it to the level of his chest and after running five or six metres threw it on top of a group of enemies, who were lying on the ground massaging their wounds.

The scooter landed with a crash, hitting one boy on the head, and others on various parts of their bodies. The

ones who had been struck started screaming with pain all together, in chorus. For some reason Mel got even more angry because of those screams, and started hitting them with inexplicable violence. Finally he climbed on the scooter and cruelly jumped up and down on it (and on them). Those poor devils screamed desperately and begged him to stop.

‘Hey, arseholes! We’re from Low River! You beat up our brother, and you haven’t finished paying for it yet!’ Gagarin communicated his solemn message to all those who were lying on the ground. ‘We’ve just taken personal satisfaction, by beating you up and cutting you. But you still have to satisfy the criminal law, which you’ve shamefully violated! By next week five of you pansy bastards will report to our district with five thousand dollars, to be paid to our community for the trouble you’ve caused. If you don’t do it, we’ll repeat this massacre every week, until we’ve killed all of you, one by one, like mangy dogs! Goodbye and good night!’

We felt like unbeatable champions; we were so pleased with how things had gone that we set off for home singing our Siberian songs at the tops of our voices.

We crossed the park, breathing in the night air, and it seemed to us as if there would never be a happier moment than this in our whole lives.

When we came out of the park we found a dozen police cars in front of us: the cops were lined up behind the cars, with their guns trained on us. A searchlight flicked on, blinding us all, and a voice shouted:

‘Weapons out of your pockets! If anyone tries anything stupid we’ll fill him full of holes! Don’t be fools, you’re not at home now!’

We obeyed and all threw our weapons on the ground. In a few seconds a heap of knives, knuckledusters and pistols had formed.

They put us into the cars, hitting us with the butts of their rifles, and drove us all to the police station. I thought of my pike, that beloved knife that was so important to me, and which I would certainly never see again. That was the only thing I could think about. The idea that I might go to prison, because of my situation, didn't even cross my mind.

They kept us in the police station for two days. They beat us up and kept us in a cramped room without food or water. Now and then someone would be taken out of the room and brought back bruised and battered.

None of us gave our real names; the home addresses were false too. The only thing we didn't lie about was the fact that we belonged to the Siberian community. Under our law juveniles can communicate with the police – we exploited this possibility to trick them, and make their job more difficult.

Mel wouldn't calm down and tried to attack the police, who hit him very hard, striking him on the head with their pistol butts, giving him a nasty wound.

Finally they set us all free, saying that next time they would kill us. Hungry, exhausted and battered we set off for home.

Only then, as I dragged myself like a dying man through the streets of my district, did I suddenly realize that I'd been very lucky. If the police had identified me I would have had to spend at least five years on the wooden bunks of some juvenile prison.

It was a miracle, I said to myself, a real miracle, to be free after an experience like that. And yet I kept thinking about my pike: as if a black hole had formed inside me, like a member of my family had died.

I approached home staring at the tips of my shoes, eyes on the ground – under the ground if it had been possible, because I was ashamed; I felt as if the whole world was judging me because I hadn't been able to keep my pike.

When I arrived, I was like a ghost, transparent and lifeless. My Uncle Vitaly came out onto the veranda and said, smiling:

'Hey! Have they reopened Auschwitz? How come nobody told me about it?'

'Leave me alone, Uncle, I'm aching all over . . . I just want to sleep . . .'

'Well, young man, unfortunately it's not possible to give punches without taking them . . . It's the rule of life . . .'

For two days I did nothing but sleep and, occasionally, eat. I was covered with bruises, and every time I turned over on my side in bed I gritted my teeth. Now and then my father or my uncle would look in at the door of my bedroom and make fun of me:

'Really makes you feel good, doesn't it, a sound beating? Will you never learn?'

I didn't reply, I just sighed heavily, and they laughed.

On the third day the desire to return to normal life made me get up early. It was about six o'clock and everyone was still asleep, except Grandfather Boris, who was preparing to do his exercises. I felt a discomfort, a

feeling very different from pain, but one which stiffens your body, so that every movement you make comes with effort; you're slow, like an old man who's afraid of losing his balance.

I washed, and examined my face in the bathroom mirror. The bruise wasn't as bad as I had expected, in fact it was barely visible. On my right hand, however, there were two very obvious black bruises, one unmistakably in the shape of a boot heel. While they were beating me up one cop must have crushed my hand: they often did this as a preventative measure, to give you irregular fractures which usually healed badly, so you would never be able to close your fist tightly or hold a weapon. Luckily they were only bruises – I had no fractures or torn ligaments. I had another big bruise between my legs, just below my male pride – it looked as though something black was stuck to my body, it looked very nasty, and above all it hurt when I emptied my bladder.

'Well, it could have been worse . . .' I concluded, and went to have breakfast. The warm milk with honey and a fresh egg put me back in the world.

I decided to go and check my boat on the river and mess about with the nets, and maybe go round the district to ask how my friends were doing.

Coming out of the house, I found my grandfather doing his exercises in the yard. Grandfather Boris was a rock – he didn't smoke and had no other vices, he was a total health fanatic. He did wrestling, judo and sambo, and transmitted these passions to all the rest of the family. When he was exercising he usually didn't stop for a second; so we only greeted each other with a look. I gestured to

him, indicating that I was going out. He smiled at me and that was all.

I went down the street that led to the river. As I passed I saw on the corner, near Mel's front door, his massive figure. He was naked, except for his underpants, and was talking to a boy from our district, a friend of ours nicknamed 'the Polack'. He was showing him all his bruises and telling him what had happened, making a lot of gestures and punching imaginary enemies in the empty air.

I approached. He had a sewn-up wound on his head, a dozen stitches. His horrible face was lit up by a smile and eighty per cent of his body was various shades of blue, green and black. But despite his physical condition he was in a very good mood. The first thing he said to me was:

'Holy Christ, your poor mother! Look what a state you're in!'

I couldn't help laughing. Nor could the Polack: he bent double with laughter, tears were coming out of his eyes.

'You clown! Have you seen yourself in the mirror? And you say I'm in a bad way! Go and get dressed, come on, let's go down to the river . . .' I gave him a gentle shove with my shoulder and he let out a yell.

'Can't you be a bit more gentle with me? I took enough blows for all of you the other evening!' he said with vanity.

He hurried off to get dressed and we started towards the river. While we were walking he told me about the others: they were all okay – a little the worse for wear, but okay. The very next day after the fight Gagarin had gone

to Caucasus, a district of our town, to settle a score with one of the locals. Lyoza and Besa, who had miraculously succeeded in hiding in the park and hadn't been caught by the police, were in the best state of all: they didn't have a scratch.

When I reached my boat I suggested to Mel that we go for a trip up the river. There was a cool wind – a pleasant morning breeze – the sun was rising and everything was bright and peaceful.

Mel jumped into the boat and lay down in the bow on his back, looking up at the cloudless sky – it was a yes.

I took one oar and with it pushed the boat away from the bank, then I rowed slowly, standing up: I had the wind on my face, it was wonderful and relaxing. Ten metres from the bank I felt the current of the river grow stronger and stronger, so I switched on the motor and, gradually increasing speed, I set off upstream towards the old bridge. I put on the jacket that I always kept in the boat. Mel was still lying down in the bow. He was hardly moving: his eyes were closed, and his foot was just faintly rocking to and fro.

When we reached the bridge I made a wide curve and turned back with the motor switched off, letting the current carry the boat, rowing only occasionally to correct the direction. As the boat floated slowly downstream, now and again we jumped into the river and swam around. In the water I felt protected, I let myself be carried by the current, holding onto the boat or keeping slightly away from it. It was the best medicine in the world, the water of the river; I could have stayed in it all day long.

When we touched the bank, Mel jumped down from the boat and said he wanted to go and see an old aunt of his who lived not far away and always complained that nobody went to visit her. I decided to go and see Grandfather Kuzya, to tell him about everything that had happened to us.

In the community of the Siberian Urkas the greatest importance is attached to the relationship between children and old people. As a result there are many customs and traditions which make it possible for elderly criminals with great experience to participate in the education of children, even if they have no blood relationship with them. Each adult criminal asks an old man, usually one who has no family and lives on his own, to help him in the education of his children. He often sends his children to him, to take him food or give him a hand about the house; in exchange the old man tells the children the stories of his life and teaches them the criminal tradition, the principles and rules of behaviour, the codes of the tattoos and everything that is in any way connected with criminal activity. This kind of relationship is called in the Siberian language 'carving'.

The word 'grandfather' in the Siberian criminal community has many meanings. The grandparents are naturally the relatives, the parents' parents, but also the highest Authorities in the criminal world – in this case the word 'Holy' or 'Blessed' is prefixed to 'grandfather', so that it is immediately clear that the person under

discussion is an Authority. An elderly educator, too, is called grandfather, but never grand-father alone: his name or nickname must always be added.

My very personal and dearly loved educator was, as will have become clear by now, Grandfather Kuzya. As far back as I can remember, my father always took me to see him. Grandfather Kuzya was highly respected in the criminal community, and he had earned this respect partly through the sorrows and sacrifices he had undergone for the sake of the community.

Grandfather Kuzya was ageless. His mother had died when he was very small and his father had been shot not long afterwards, and the family that had adopted him never knew exactly how old he was.

As a young man Grandfather Kuzya had belonged to a gang of Urkas led by a famous criminal called 'Cross', a man of old Siberian faith who had opposed first the power of the tsar and later that of the communists. In Siberia, Grandfather Kuzya explained to me, no criminal ever supported a political force; everybody lived only following their own laws and fighting any government power. Siberia has always been coveted by the Russians because it is a land that is very rich in natural resources. Besides the fur-bearing animals, which in Russia are considered a national treasure, Siberia had large amounts of gold, diamonds and coal; later oil and gas were discovered too. All governments have tried to exploit the region as much as possible – of course without the slightest regard for the population. The Russians would arrive, said Grandfather Kuzya, build their towns in the middle of the woods, dig up

the land, and carry off its treasures on their trains and ships.

The Siberian criminals, expert robbers whose ancestors had for centuries attacked the mercantile caravans coming from China and India, had had no difficulty in attacking the Russian ones too.

In those days the Urkas had a particular philosophy, a world-view, which they called the 'Great Pact'. It was a plan which made it possible to maintain a concerted resistance against the government. According to the old criminal law, each individual gang could carry out no more than one robbery every six months: in this way the quality of criminal activity was kept at a high level, because it is clear that if a group has only one chance to rob a caravan, it must prepare well and take no risks, avoiding any false moves. People were keen to organize the job well, otherwise they would have to go half a year without eating. The Great Pact eliminated this rule, allowing the gangs to carry out robberies continually, because the aim was not that of self-enrichment, but of driving the Russian invaders out of Siberia. Old criminals joined forces with the new ones, forming very large gangs. The most famous were those of Angel, Tiger and Tayga.

Cross had a smaller gang, comprising about fifty men. They robbed trains and the small ships that plied from the diamond mines on the River Lena to southern Siberia, and to the region called Altay. One day they made the mistake of coming out of the woods, and ran into the forces of the communist army. They tried to resist but in the end were outnumbered by the communists:

they were surrounded, and almost all of them died in battle.

The Urkas never surrendered; to them it was unworthy to be captured, so if they saw that the situation was hopeless they would say their farewells, wish each other good fortune and plunge into the fray, until the enemy killed them. The only possibility of surviving was to be captured because of your wounds: to be wounded and taken prisoner was not considered unworthy.

In that battle three young Urkas were captured. One of them was Kuzya; he had taken a blow to the head and passed out. The communists, to show all the Siberians how those who opposed the government were treated, immediately ordered an exemplary 'people's' trial for the prisoners in the town of Tagil, where the population had surrendered to the Russians, who had set up military barracks and police stations everywhere.

Many people attended the trial, because many Siberians sympathized with the Urkas and supported their struggle against the communists.

The judge and his 'jury', made up of 'representatives' of the people, and naturally all communists, sentenced all three to death. The sentence was to be carried out the following day by firing squad, in front of the walls of the old railway station.

Next day the place was full of people. Many had brought icons and put crosses outside their shirts, to emphasize their aversion to the communist regime. The women wept and asked for a pardon, the men prayed to the Lord to welcome those three slaves of His who were about to be killed unjustly. The atmosphere was very tense, and reinforcements

had been sent from the police station with orders to go into action should the people become dangerous.

At last the criminals were driven up, taken out of the car and made to stand up, in chains. They were led before the judge and the public prosecutor, who read out to them all the charges which the Soviet government had brought against them. Then the judge read out the sentence and authorized the police to carry it out at once.

The three were placed with their backs turned and their faces against the wall, but none of them wanted to stand in that position, so they turned around to face the firing squad. Some of the crowd threw crucifixes onto the ground near the criminals' feet, praying to the Lord to make the authorities pardon them.

The commander of the firing squad gave a series of orders to his men, who prepared their rifles, took aim at their targets and fired. Two condemned men fell dead on the ground, but the third, the one in the middle, continued to stand up and look at the people. His shirt was soaked with blood and he had eight wounds in his body, but he didn't fall; he stood motionless, breathing in the cold morning air deeply. It was Kuzya, the young Siberian Urka.

According to the rules of the Soviet state the death sentence could only be carried out once; if the condemned person survived he must be set free. For this reason, years later the communists took to shooting the condemned prisoners from half a metre away and straight in the head – to remove all possible doubt.

The people went wild with joy; to them Kuzya became a symbol, living proof of the existence of God, who had

heard their prayers and shown His powers. From that day on every Siberian knew the story of Kuzya and referred to him as ‘the Marked One’.

Partly because of this miraculous event, Kuzya was considered an Authority among the criminals. His advice was listened to by many good, honest criminals of different castes, and since he was wise and intelligent and had no personal interests – because his life, as he was fond of saying, belonged totally to the community – he succeeded in winning everyone’s cooperation and friendship.

He had been in many Russian prisons, had sanctioned many alliances with various criminal societies and mediated the resolution of conflicts between gangs. Thanks to his intervention many criminals had signed truces among themselves, agreeing to live in peace to their mutual benefit, thus enhancing the prosperity of the whole community.

If in any part of Russia two criminal powers clashed over a certain question, he would set off on his travels and, using his Authority, would force people to negotiate, to find the ways towards a peaceable solution. When I asked him questions about this role of his as a ‘man of peace’, he would reply that the people who made war were those who didn’t follow the true principles, who had no dignity. There was nothing in this world that could not be shared in such a way as to make everyone happy.

‘He who wants too much is a madman, because a man cannot possess more than his heart is able to love.

Everyone wants to do business, to see his family happy and bring up his children in goodness and peace. This is just. Only in this way can we share the world that Our Lord created for us.'

Grandfather Kuzya dedicated his whole life to keeping peace in the criminal community; as a result everyone was fond of him and he had no enemies. My father told me that once, when Grandfather Kuzya was in a maximum security prison, a group of young criminals from St Petersburg – people of the 'new style', who didn't respect the old rules – had broken a truce that had been agreed some time earlier between various communities thanks to his assistance. They had killed a lot of people, gaining control of a large area of business, after which they had tried to prove to others, the people who followed the old criminal rules, that those rules were no longer valid and had no real power behind them. To do this they needed to strike at some great Authority, and they chose the figure of Grandfather Kuzya, because he represented the highest power in the Siberian community. They devised a simple and very offensive plan, sending to him in prison a letter of invitation to a meeting that was to be held in St Petersburg, informing him that if he did not attend they would no longer consider him to be an active criminal.

This kind of blackmail is a very serious matter for a criminal, far more serious than the murder of a relative or a personal insult, because it affects the prestige that is attributed to an individual by the entire community, so the insult extends to the whole community and its representatives.

Well, Grandfather Kuzya forced the prison administrators to grant a week's release to him and five other Siberian Authorities who were being held in different prisons in Russia, by threatening a mass suicide, which none of them would have hesitated to implement.

In the middle of the meeting, when the young St Petersburg criminals were already planning in minute detail how to compel all the supporters of the old Authorities to hand over control of the area to them, taking it for granted that none of them would attend, Grandfather Kuzya and the other five prisoners arrived.

After that encounter the young men disappeared, they just vanished into thin air: many thought of the old Siberian ritual which involves the bodies of enemies being minced up to the point of complete disintegration and then mixed in with the soil of the woods.

According to the Siberian criminal law, every active criminal can give up his post and retire – become a kind of 'pensioner'. Once he has done this he no longer has the right to use his name or express his opinion on questions connected with criminal affairs or the resolution of conflicts. The criminal community supports him by giving him enough money to live on, and in exchange he takes on the responsibility of educating the young. He becomes, as has already been mentioned, a 'grandfather': a name that is given as a mark of great respect. People who are so called are regarded by the rest of the community as wise men able to give essential advice to younger

criminals, and usually criminal meetings are organized at their homes.

Grandfather Kuzya had retired from business – or, as we say, ‘tied the knot’ – in the early 1980s, when I was born. His retirement had caused considerable tension in the criminal community: many feared that without him a lot of old truces would be broken and there would be war.

Grandfather Kuzya said that with or without him things were bound to change, because it was the times and the individuals that were different. When he discussed the matter with me, he explained it like this:

‘The young want easy money, they want to take without giving anything in exchange, they want to fly without first having learned how to walk. They’ll end up killing each other. Then they’ll come to terms with the cops, and when that happens, I hope for your sake, my dear, that you’ll be far away from here, because this place will become a graveyard of the good and honest.’

Naturally I considered everything Grandfather Kuzya said to be the highest expression of human intelligence and criminal experience.

We talked about the future, about what our life would be like and how things would be organized. He was very pessimistic, but he never feared that I would disappoint him; he considered me to be different from the other youngsters of our community.

After 1992, when the military forces of Moldova tried to occupy the territory of Transnistria, our town was abandoned by everybody; we were left to fend for ourselves, as in fact we always had done. All the armed

criminals resisted the Moldovan soldiers, and after three months of battles they drove them out.

When the danger of an all-out conflict had passed, Mother Russia sent us her so-called 'help': the Fourteenth Army, led by the charismatic general Lebed. When they arrived in our town, which had already been free for several days, they applied the policy of military administration: curfew, house-to-house searches, the arrest and elimination of undesirable elements. During that period the river often brought to the bank the bodies of the people who had been shot, their hands tied behind their backs with wire and signs of torture on their bodies. I myself fished out four corpses of people who had been executed, so I can confirm with all my youthful authority that shootings by the Russian military were very common in Transnistria.

The Russians tried to exploit the circumstances to install among us, in the land of criminals, their government representatives, who would have the job of administering what had previously been solely in our hands. Many Siberian criminals during that period ran a serious risk of being killed; my father, for example, was the target of three attacks, but he miraculously escaped and, not wanting to wait for a fourth, left Transnistria and moved to Greece, where he had friends as a result of some old trading connections.

The criminals of the town tried to join forces to fight the Russian military, but many members of the communities were frightened and in the event proved willing to collaborate with the new regime. The Siberians renounced all contact with the rest of society, and by 1998

were completely isolated; they didn't collaborate with anyone and didn't support anyone. Other communities reached a compromise with the regime, which had proposed one of its own men as president of the country and political watchdog over all business. Very soon new government forces eliminated the people involved in those terms, taking over the administration of affairs.

Grandfather Kuzya told me everything he knew:

'Our law says that we mustn't talk to the cops: do you know why it says that? Not just out of caprice. It says this because the cops are the government's dogs, the tools the government uses against us. My son, they shot me when I was twenty-three years old, and ever since then I have lived my whole life in humility, without possessing anything – no family, no children, no house: all my life has been spent in prison, suffering, and sharing my sufferings with others. That's why I have power, because many people know me and know that when I cross my arms on the table I don't speak in my own private interest, but for the good of everyone. That, my boy, is why in our world everyone trusts me. And now tell me why we should trust those who have spent their whole lives killing our brothers, locking us up in prison, torturing us and treating us as if we didn't belong to the human race? How is it possible, tell me, to trust those who live thanks to our deaths? Cops are different from the rest of humanity, because they have an innate desire to serve, to have an employer. They don't understand anything about freedom, and they're scared of free men. Their bread is our sorrow, my son; how is it possible to reach an agreement with these people?'

Everything Grandfather Kuzya told me helped me to cope with reality, not to become the slave of a mistaken idea or a never-realized dream. I knew with certainty that I was witnessing the death of our society and so I tried to survive, passing through this great vortex of souls, human stories, from which I was drifting further and further away.

Every time I went to see Grandfather Kuzya, my mother would give me a bag of home-cooked food. My mother was an excellent cook; in our district she was renowned for her red soup, her wels catfish stuffed with rice, vegetables and apples, her pâté of caviare and butter, her country-style fish soup and, especially, her cakes. Grandfather Kuzya called her 'little mother': that's how the criminals express the greatest respect and admiration for women. Whenever I took him something made by my mother, he would say:

'Lilya, Lilya, my sweet little mother! Kiss your hands all the time, there's nothing else we can do!'

Outside Grandfather Kuzya's house there was an old wooden bench. He would often sit there and watch the river. I would settle down next to him and we would sit there all day like that, sometimes till evening. He would recount to me the adventures of his own life, or the stories of the Siberian Urkas, which I loved. We sang songs. He was very good at singing, and knew a lot of criminal songs by heart. I had a good memory; I only had to hear a song a couple of times and I'd remember it instantly. Grandfather

Kuzya was very pleased about this, and he would always ask me before he sang:

‘Do you remember this one?’

‘I certainly do! It’s my favourite!’

‘Well done, young rascal! Sing along with me, then!’

And we’d sing together, often arriving late for supper.

What I liked most of all was when Grandfather Kuzya told me about Siberia: the stories of the Urkas, of how they had opposed the regime of the tsar and that of the communists. It was wonderful, because in those stories you felt the thread that held my family together, and connected the people of the past with those of the present. Thanks to this thread everything seemed much more believable, real.

While he was narrating, he would almost always emphasize the link between the characters and the people we met every day in the street, to make me understand that although times had changed, the values had remained the same.

Grandfather Kuzya had been one of the first Siberians to arrive in Transnistria. He told the story of that move with sorrow, and it was clear that he had many dark feelings inside him, connected with that time.

‘The soldiers arrived in the village at night. There were lots of them, all armed, with bayonets fixed, as if they were going to war . . . I was only small, about ten years old; my parents had died a long time ago, and I lived with some good people who had raised me as if I were their

own son. The men were all away, in the Tayga; there was no one in the village but the old men, and the women with the children. I remember they entered the house without knocking and without taking their boots off. There was a man dressed in a black leather jacket and trousers. I remember the smell of that leather; it was sickening, unbearable. He looked at us and asked Pelagea, the lady of the house:

“Do you have any news of your husband? Do you know where he is?”

“He’s gone hunting in the Tayga. I don’t know when he’ll be back . . .”

“I thought as much. Right, put on some warm clothes, take only the most essential things, go outside and line up with the others.” This man was a commander; he had the air of someone who knew he had power in his hands.

“But what’s happening? Why do we have to get dressed and go outside? It’s night; the children are asleep . . .” Pelagea was agitated and her lips trembled as she spoke.

‘The man stopped for a moment, looked carefully round the room and went over to the red corner, where the icons were: he picked one up and hurled it against the wall. The icon broke in two. He picked up some other icons, put them in the stove and said:

“In ten minutes we’re going to set fire to the village. If you want to stay here and be burnt alive, please yourselves.”

‘Pelagea had five children; the youngest was four, the eldest thirteen. In addition she looked after me and a fourteen-year-old girl, Varya, who had also lost her

parents. She was a good woman, and very brave. Calmly she explained to us children that there was nothing to be afraid of, that everything was in the hands of the Lord. She made us dress in warm clothes, fetched the gold she kept in a safe place and hid it in our clothes. She took some ash from the stove and dirtied Varya's face; she did this deliberately, to make her ugly, because she was afraid the soldiers would rape her.

“If they ask you anything, don't speak, don't look them in the face, let me do the talking. Everything will be all right.”

‘She took a big bag full of bread and dried meat and we went out.

‘Outside there were a lot of people; the soldiers were looting the houses, breaking doors and windows and carrying off various objects, especially the golden frames of the icons. They had made a bonfire in the middle of the road, onto which they threw icons and crucifixes. Everyone was standing outside their houses, helplessly watching this disaster.

‘An officer went along the lined-up people with a soldier, and whenever he saw an old person he ordered the soldier:

“This one, out!” and immediately the person he had picked out was run through with a bayonet. They were eliminating anyone who might slow down the trek.

‘A young woman, the mother of three children, was taken by a group of soldiers into a house, where they raped her. Suddenly she rushed out naked, screaming in despair, and from the window of the house a soldier shot her in the back: she fell down on the snow, dead. One

of her children, the eldest, ran towards her, crying out; a nearby soldier hit him on the head with the butt of his rifle, and the boy fell to the ground unconscious.

‘Then an officer shouted angrily:

“Who fired that shot? Who was it?”

‘The soldier who had fired out of the window emerged, looking sheepish.

“It was me, comrade!”

“Are you out of your mind? The order was only to fire in an emergency! Use your bayonet – I don’t want to hear any gunfire! If those in the woods hear us, we’ll never make it to the train!” He was agitated, and immediately afterwards he ordered an NCO: “Hurry up! Set fire to the houses and get the people lined up, start the march!”

‘The soldiers pushed everyone into the middle of the road, forming a column, then they ordered us to walk. We went away, full of hatred and fear; now and then we looked back and saw our houses burning in the darkness like little paper boxes.

‘We walked all night, till we reached the railway in the middle of the woods; waiting for us there was a train with wooden wagons, without windows. They ordered us to get on, and when we did so we realized that the train was already full of people from various other villages. They told their story, which was a duplicate of our own. Someone said he’d heard the train was bound for a distant region, in the south of Russia; it would travel across Siberia for another week, collecting people from the various burnt-out villages.

‘They distributed firewood to burn in the little stoves that the wagons were equipped with, and a little bread

and ice-cold water. The train left, and after a terrible journey lasting a month we reached our destination, here, in the region called Transnistria, which some also called Bessarabia.

‘When the train stopped we realized that the soldiers were no longer on it, only the drivers and a few railwaymen.

‘We didn’t know anyone here; we only had a bit of gold with us; a lot of people had managed to bring their weapons too.

‘We went to live by the river: we’d grown up on the Siberian rivers and were good at fishing and sailing; and that was the origin of our district, Low River.’

In present-day Russia hardly anyone knows about the deportation of the Siberians to Transnistria; some remember the times of communist collectivization, when the country was criss-crossed by trains full of poor people being moved from one region to another for reasons known only to the government.

Grandfather Kuzya used to say the communists had planned to separate the Urkas from their families so as to make our community die, but that instead, by an irony of fate, they had probably saved it.

From Transnistria many young men went to Siberia, to participate in the war against the communists: they robbed trains, ships and military stores and created a lot of difficulties for the communists. At regular intervals they returned to Transnistria to lick their wounds, or to spend

time with their family and friends. Despite everything, this land has become a second home, to which the Siberian criminals have bound their lives.

Grandfather Kuzya didn't educate me by giving lessons, but by talking, telling his stories and listening to my opinions. Thanks to him I learned many things which have enabled me to survive. His way of seeing and understanding the world was very humble; he didn't talk about life from the position of one who observes from above, but from that of a man who stands on the earth and endeavours to stay there as long as possible.

'Many people desperately seek what they are not able to keep and understand, and consequently are full of hatred and feel bad all their lives.'

I liked his way of thinking, because it was very easy to understand. I didn't have to put myself in someone else's shoes, I just had to listen to him, remaining myself, to understand that everything that came out of his lips was true. He had a wisdom that came from deep down, it didn't even seem human, but as if derived from something greater and stronger than man.

'Look what a state we're in, son . . . Men are born happy, yet they convince themselves that happiness is something they have to find in life . . . And what are we? A herd of animals without instinct, which follow mistaken ideas, searching for what they already have . . .'

Once, while we were fishing, we were discussing happiness. At one point he asked me:

‘Look at the animals: do you think they know anything about happiness?’

‘Well, I think they feel happy or sad now and then, only they can’t express their feelings . . .’ I replied.

He looked at me in silence and then said:

‘Do you know why God gave man a longer life than that of the animals?’

‘No, I’ve never thought about it . . .’

‘Because animals base their lives on instinct and don’t make mistakes. Man bases his life on reason, so he needs part of his life for making mistakes, another part for understanding his mistakes, and a third for trying to live without making any more.’

I often went to visit Grandfather Kuzya, especially when I was a bit depressed or worried about something, because he understood me instantly and managed to make all my unpleasant thoughts disappear.

That morning, after I’d been beaten up by the police, I felt such a weight in my soul that it almost hurt me to breathe. When I thought about what had happened to me I was close to tears, I swear it – tears of despair and humiliation. The boat trip with Mel had done me good, but now I really needed Grandfather Kuzya and his warm words. I walked towards his house like a sleepwalker who doesn’t know where he’s going; it was a kind of instinct that guided me at that moment.

Grandfather Kuzya always woke up very early, so as soon as I reached the gate of his sister’s house, where

he lived, I found him already on the roof, launching the first pigeons into the air. He saw me and beckoned to me to come up. I got an old, twisted ladder with two rungs missing, rested it against the roof and started to climb. Grandfather Kuzya in the meantime was watching a female pigeon fly off into the sky; she was already quite high. Then he looked down at me and said:

‘Do you want to fly this one?’ showing me a male pigeon which he was holding in his right hand.

‘Yes, I’ll try . . .’ I replied. I knew very well how to launch pigeons – we had a lot of them in my family. My Grandfather Boris was famous for his pigeons – he travelled all over Russia looking for new breeds, then crossed them and selected the strongest ones.

Grandfather Kuzya didn’t have many pigeons – no more than fifty or so – but they were all exceptional specimens, because the many people who came to see him from all over the country brought him the finest pigeons they had, as gifts.

The pigeon Grandfather Kuzya was holding in his hand was of an Asiatic breed. He came from Tajikistan. He was very strong and handsome, one of the most expensive on the market. I picked him up and was about to launch him, but Grandfather Kuzya stopped me:

‘Wait, let her get up a bit higher . . .’

To wait was to risk losing her – if they fly too high, many female pigeons drop down dead. They’re used to being in a pair, together with the male: without the male to help them descend they can’t return to the ground; they have to be guided. So it’s essential to launch the male at the right moment: he rises, and the female, hearing him

beat his wings and turn somersaults in the air, starts flying down towards him. But our female was already a long way off.

‘Now, Kolima, let him go!’ said Grandfather Kuzya, and at once, with a vigorous sweep of my arms I launched the pigeon.

‘Well done! Good boy! May Jesus Christ bless you!’ Grandfather Kuzya was pleased; he watched the pigeons approach one another in the air. Together we witnessed that spectacular union: the male did more than twenty somersaults, and the female flew in ever tighter circles around him, almost touching him with her wings. They were a beautiful couple.

Eventually the two joined together in the air, and one beside the other they began to descend lower and lower, in wide circles. Grandfather Kuzya looked at my face, pointing at my bruise.

‘Come on, let’s make some chifir . . .’ We got down from the roof and went into the kitchen. Grandfather Kuzya put the water for the chifir on the fire.

Chifir is a very strong tea which is made and drunk according to an ancient ritual. It has a powerful stimulant effect: drinking one cup is like drinking half a litre of coffee all in one go. It is prepared in a small saucepan, the *chifirbak*, which is not used for any other purpose and is never washed with detergent, only rinsed in cold water. If the *chifirbak* is black – dirty with the residue of tea – it is more highly prized, because the chifir will come

out better. When the water boils, you extinguish the fire and add black tea, which must be of whole leaves, not crumbled, and must only come from Irkutsk, in Siberia: there they grow a particular tea, the strongest and tastiest of them all, and beloved of criminals all over the country. Very different from the famous tea of Krasnodar, which is highly popular with housewives: a weak tea, widespread especially in Moscow and in southern Russia, and good for breakfast. For a proper chifir you use up to half a kilo of tea leaves. The leaves have to be left to brew for no more than ten minutes, otherwise the chifir becomes acidic and unpleasant. You put a lid on the saucepan so that the steam doesn't escape; it's advisable to wrap the whole thing in a towel, to keep the temperature. The chifir is ready when there are no more leaves floating on the surface: hence we say the chifir has 'fallen' to indicate that it's ready. It is filtered through a strainer: the tea leaves are not thrown away, they are put on a dish and left there to dry; they will be used later for making ordinary tea, which can be drunk with sugar and lemon, while eating cake.

Chifir must be drunk in a large mug made of iron or silver, which can hold more than a litre of tea. You drink it in a group, passing round this mug, called *bodyaga*, which in the old Siberian criminal language means 'flask'. You pass it to your companion in a clockwise direction, never anticlockwise; each time you must drink three sips, no more, no less. While drinking you must not speak, smoke, eat or do anything else. It is forbidden to blow into the mug: that is considered bad manners. The first person to drink is the one who has made the chifir, then

the mug passes to the others, and the one who finishes it must get up, wash it and put it back in its place. Once that has been done you can talk, smoke, or eat something sweet.

These rules are not the same in all communities: for example, in central Russia they don't take three sips but only two, and blowing into the mug is considered an act of kindness to the others, because you are cooling the boiling drink for them. In any case, offering a chifir to someone is a sign of respect, of friendship.

The best chifir is that made over a burning wood fire. Consequently in many criminals' houses the fireplaces have a special structure for making chifir; otherwise we use a stove, but never one heated by gas.

In Siberia, once it has been made, the chifir must be drunk straight away: if it gets cold it is not warmed up again, but thrown away. In other places, especially in prison, the chifir can be warmed up, but not more than once. And warmed-up chifir is no longer called chifir, but chifirok – a diminutive, in all senses.

We drank the chifir in silence, as the tradition requires, and only when we had finished did Grandfather Kuzya start talking:

‘Well, how are you, young rascal?’

‘I'm fine, Grandfather Kuzya, except that a few days ago we got into some trouble, in Tiraspol, and we were roughed up a bit by the cops . . .’ I wanted to be honest, but at the same time I didn't want to exaggerate. With

someone like Grandfather Kuzya there was no need to boast or to moan about what happened in your life, because he had certainly been through worse.

‘I know all about it, Kolima . . . But you’re alive, they didn’t kill you. So why are you in such a bad mood?’

‘They took my pike, the one Uncle Hedgehog gave me . . .’ When I uttered these words I felt as if I were attending my own funeral. What had happened became even more terrible, and broke my heart, as I described it.

When I think about what I must have looked like at that moment I feel like laughing, which is exactly what Grandfather Kuzya did:

‘All this gloom just because the cops took your pike! You know that everything that happens is in the hands of God and forms part of His great plan. Think about it: our pikes are powerful because they contain the force that Our Lord puts in them. And when someone takes our pike and uses it without honesty, the pike will lead him to ruin, because the force of the Lord will destroy the enemy. So what have you got to cry about? A good thing has happened: your pike will bring many misfortunes to a cop, and eventually kill him. Then another will take it, and another, and your pike will kill them all . . .’

Grandfather Kuzya’s explanation gave me some relief, but although I was pleased that my pike would harm the police, I still missed it.

I didn’t want to disappoint him and whine in front of him, so I put a lilt in my voice, making it sound as cheerful as possible:

‘Okay, I’m happy, then . . .’

Grandfather Kuzya smiled.

‘Good boy! That’s the way: always hold your chest like a wheel and your pecker like a pistol . . .’

A week later I went round to Grandfather Kuzya’s again to take him a jar of caviare pâté and butter. He called me into the living room and stood me in front of the red corner of the icons. There, on the shelf, was a beautiful open pike, with a very thin blade and a bone handle. I gazed at it spellbound.

‘I had it sent all the way from Siberia, our brothers brought it for a young friend of mine . . .’ He picked it up and put it in my hand. ‘Take it, Kolima, and remember: the things that matter are the ones inside you.’

I was again the happy owner of a pike and I felt as if I’d been given a second life.

In the evening I wrote in big letters on a sheet of paper the words Grandfather Kuzya had said to me, and hung the paper in my bedroom, near the icons. My uncle, when he saw it, looked at me with a question-mark in his eyes. I made a gesture with my hands, as if to say: ‘That’s how it is.’ He smiled at me and said:

‘Hey, we’ve got a philosopher in the family!’

