

# WHEN THE SKIN SPEAKS

When I was small I loved drawing. I carried a little exercise book around with me and drew everything I saw. I liked to see how the subjects transferred onto paper, and I loved the process of drawing. It was like being inside a bubble, enclosed in a world of my own, and God only knows what happened in my head during those moments.

We children all wanted to be like the grown-ups, so we imitated them in everything we did: our speech, the way we dressed, and also our tattoos. The adult criminals – our fathers, grandfathers, uncles and neighbours – were covered in tattoos.

In the Russian criminal communities there is a strong culture of tattoos, and each tattoo has a meaning. The tattoo is a kind of identity card which places you within the criminal society – displaying your particular criminal

'trade', and other kinds of information about your personal life and prison experiences.

Each community has its own tradition of tattooing, symbology and different patterns, according to which the signs are positioned on the body and eventually read and translated. The oldest tattooing culture is that of Siberia; it had been the forebears of the Siberian criminals who had created the tradition of tattooing symbols in a codified, secret manner. Later this culture was copied by other communities and spread throughout prisons all over Russia, transforming the principal meanings of the tattoos and the ways in which they were executed and translated.

The tattoos of the most powerful criminal caste in Russia, which is called Black Seed, are all copied from the Urka tradition, but have different meanings. The images may be the same, but only a person who is able to read a body can analyse their hidden meaning and explain why they are different.

Unlike the other communities, Siberians tattoo only by hand, using various kinds of small needle. Tattoos done with electrical tattoo machines or similar devices are not considered worthy.

In the tradition of the Siberian Urkas the process of tattooing continues throughout the life of a criminal. The first few signs are tattooed when he is twelve years old. Then, over the years, other details are added, gradually building up a narrative. Each experience he has in his life is encoded and concealed within this single large tattoo, which becomes increasingly complete as time goes on. It has the structure of a spiral, starting from the extremities

– the hands and feet – and ending at the centre of the body. The last parts of the body to be tattooed are the back and chest; this is done when the criminal is about forty or fifty years old. You will never see young people with large, complete tattoos in the Siberian criminal community, as you do in other communities.

To be able to read bodies decorated with such complex tattoos you need a lot of experience and to know the tattooing tradition perfectly. As a result the figure of the tattooist has a special place within the Siberian criminal community: he is like a priest, trusted by everyone to act on their behalf.

As a child I was intrigued by this tradition, but I didn't know much about it – only what my grandfather, my father and my uncle had told me. I was interested in the idea of being able to read everything that was written on their bodies.

So I spent a long time copying the tattoos which I saw around me, and the more I copied them the more I despaired, because I couldn't find one tattoo that was the same as another. The main subjects recurred, but the details changed. After a while I understood that the secret must lie in the details, so I began to analyse them: but it was like trying to learn a foreign language without having anyone to teach you. I had noticed that certain images were placed on some parts of the body but not on others. I tried to make connections between the images, venturing hypotheses, but the details felt elusive, like sand that slipped through my fingers.

When I was about ten I began to do fake tattoos on my friends' arms, recreating with a biro the images I had

seen on grown-up criminals. Later, neighbours started asking me to do specific drawings for them, which they would then go and have tattooed on their bodies. They would explain to me how they wanted it to look and I would reproduce it on paper. Many paid me – not much, ten roubles a time, but to me the mere fact that they paid me at all was amazing.

In this way, without intending to, I became quite well known in the district, and the old tattooist who did all the tattoos based on the drawings that I prepared – Grandfather Lyosha – sent me his regards and his compliments now and then, through different people. I was pleased: it made me feel important.

On my twelfth birthday, my father had a serious talk with me: he told me I was old enough and must think about what I wanted to do with my life, so that I could break away from my parents and become independent. Many of my friends had already done a bit of smuggling under the guidance of the adults, and I too had made a number of trips with my Uncle Sergey, crossing the border repeatedly with gold in my rucksack.

I replied that I wanted to learn the tattooist's trade.

A few days later my father sent me to Grandfather Lyosha's house to ask him if he would take me on as his apprentice. Grandfather Lyosha gave me a warm welcome, offered me some tea, leafed through my drawing-book and examined the tattoos that I'd done on myself.

‘Congratulations! You’ve got a “cold hand”,’ he commented. ‘Why do you want to be a tattooist?’

‘I like drawing, and I want to learn our tradition; I want to understand how to read tattoos . . .’

He laughed, then he got up and went out of the room. When he came back he was holding a tattooing needle in his hands.

‘Look at this carefully: this is what I tattoo honest people with. It’s this needle that has won me the respect of many and earned me my humble bread. It’s because of this needle that I have spent half my life in prison, tormented by the cops; throughout my life I have never succeeded in possessing anything except this needle. Go home and think about it. If you really want to lead this life, come back to me: I’ll teach you all I know about the trade.’

I thought about it all night. I didn’t like the idea of spending half my life in prison and being tortured by the cops, but given that the alternatives that lay ahead promised more or less the same, I decided to give it a try.

Next day I was back at the door of his house. Grandfather Lyosha explained to me first of all what it meant to ‘learn’ to be a tattooist. I would have to help him with the housework – doing the cleaning, going shopping, gathering firewood – so that he would have time to devote to me.

And that was how it turned out. Little by little Grandfather Lyosha taught me everything. How to prepare a work-station for the tattooing, how to do a drawing, how best to transfer it onto the skin. He gave me homework, too: for example, I would have to invent ways

in which images could intertwine, while still remaining faithful to the criminal tradition. He taught me the meanings of the images and their positions on the body, explaining the origin of each one, and how it had evolved in the Siberian tradition.

After a year and a half he allowed me to retouch a faded tattoo for a client, a criminal who had just been released from prison. All I had to do was go over the lines. The tattoo was a rather poorly executed image of a wolf – I remember that it was out of proportion – so I suggested that I should also alter it slightly from the ‘artistic’ point of view. I drew a new image, which I could easily use to cover the old one, and showed it to my master and his client. They agreed. So I did the tattoo, which came out well: the criminal was happy and thanked me profusely.

From that moment my master allowed me to fix all the old and faded tattoos, and when I had become more expert, with his permission I began to do new jobs, on virgin skin.

I started to create images for the tattoos using the symbology of the Siberian criminal tradition with ever greater confidence. Now, whenever Grandfather Lyosha gave me a new assignment, he no longer showed me how to draw the image; he simply told me the meaning that had to be encoded in it. I used the symbols, which I knew by now, to create the image, as a writer uses the letters of the alphabet to build up a story.

Sometimes I met people with unusual tattoos, which had interesting stories behind them. Many of them came to see my master, and he would show me their tattoos,

explaining their meaning to me. These were what the criminals call 'signatures': tattoos that have a final meaning which incorporates a symbol, or even the name, of some elderly, powerful Authority. They work like a passport, and often prevent a person being given a hostile reception in some place far from his home. Usually these tattoos are executed in a highly individual style. It is possible to make them unique, without directly linking their meanings with the name or nickname of the person who wears them: you have to exploit the characteristics and peculiarities of the body and connect them with the meanings of the other tattoos. I saw signatures on various people, and each time I discovered different ways of combining the subjects to create unique images.

Once when I was at home a boy came to call me, saying that Grandfather Lyosha wanted to see me, to show me something. I went with him.

There were some people in my master's house – about ten in all. Some were from our district, others I had never seen before. They were criminals who had come all the way from Siberia. They were sitting round a table and talking among themselves. My master introduced me:

'This young rascal is studying to become a *kolshik*.<sup>1</sup> I teach him well; hopefully one day, with the help of Our Lord, he really will become one.'

A sturdy man got up from the table. He had a long beard and a number of tattoos on his face which I read

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1. In the criminal language this means 'he who stings', i.e. the tattooist.

instantly – he was a man who had been condemned to death but pardoned at the last moment.

‘So you’re Yury’s son?’

‘Yes, I’m Nikolay “Kolima”, son of Yury “The Rootless”,’ I replied in a firm voice.

The criminal smiled, and laid his gigantic hand on my head:

‘I’ll come round to see your father later. We’re old friends, in our youth we belonged to the same family in a juvenile prison . . .’

My master patted me on the back:

‘Now I’m going to show you something that you must be able to recognize, if you want to become a good tattooist . . .’

We crossed the room and went out into the back yard, where there was a small garden with a few fruit trees. We entered a small toolshed made of wood and rusty corrugated iron. My master lit a lamp which hung down from the ceiling, dangling at the level of my face.

On the floor lay a large object which had been covered with a sheet of coarse cloth. My master removed the sheet: underneath was a dead man. He was naked, and there were no signs of knife wounds or blood, only a large black bruise on the neck.

Strangled, I thought.

The skin was very white, almost like paper; he must have been dead for several hours. The face was relaxed, the mouth slightly open, the lips purple.

‘Look here, Kolima, look closely.’ Bending down and turning towards me Grandfather Lyosha pointed to a tattoo on the dead man’s right arm.

‘Well, what do you say? What is this tattoo?’

He asked me this with a kind of mystery in his voice, as if the time had come for me to show what I had learned from him.

Without really meaning to, I began to analyse the tattoo and express my conclusions out loud. Grandfather Lyosha listened to me very patiently, keeping the corpse turned towards me.

‘It’s the signature of a Siberian Authority nicknamed “Tungus”. It was done in Special Prison no. 36, in the year 1989, in the town of Ilin, in Siberia. There is also the blessing for the reader, a clear sign that the tattooist who did it is a Siberian Urka . . .’

‘Is that all? Don’t you see anything else?’ my master asked me suspiciously.

‘Well, it’s fine, as a tattoo: it’s well executed, perfectly legible, has a classic combination of images and is very clear . . . But . . .’

Yes, there was a but.

‘It’s the only tattoo on the body,’ I continued, ‘and yet in the image there are references to other tattoos, which are missing here . . . It was done in 1989, but it seems to have healed only a few months ago: it’s still too black, the pigment hasn’t faded . . . Also, this signature is in a strange position. Usually the arm is where you draw “seeds” or “wings”,<sup>1</sup> whereas signatures act as a kind of bridge between two tattoos. They can be done on the inside of the forearm, or more rarely just above the foot, on the ankle . . .’

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1. The tattoos so called do not represent seeds or wings: they contain various images which allude to the criminal’s personal characteristics, the promises he has made and any romantic attachments he might have.

‘And why are they done there?’ my master interrupted me.

‘Because it’s important for the tattoo to be in a place where it can be easily displayed in any situation. Whereas this one has been put in an inconvenient place.’

I stopped for a moment. I made some calculations and deductions in my poor head, then finally gazed at my master wide-eyed:

‘I don’t believe it! Don’t tell me, Grandfather Lyosha . . . He can’t be a . . .’ I stopped again, because I couldn’t utter the word.

‘Yes, my boy, this man is a cop. Look at him closely, because who knows? Some time in your life you may come across another who tries to pass himself off as one of us, and then you won’t have time to think, you’ll have to be a hundred per cent sure and recognize him straight away. This guy somehow found out that one of us wore a signature, and he copied it exactly, without knowing what a signature really is, how it’s made and how it’s read and translated . . . He got himself killed because he was too stupid.’

I wasn’t shocked, either by the body of the strangled policeman or by the story of the tattoo copied from a criminal. The only thing that seemed strange, unnatural and alien at that moment was the cop’s empty, tattooless body. It seemed to me an impossible thing, almost like a disease. Ever since I was a baby I had always been surrounded by tattooed people, and to me this was completely normal. Seeing a body with nothing tattooed on it had a strange effect on me – a physical suffering, a kind of pity.

My own body, too, seemed strange to me – I found it too empty.

According to the rule, tattoos are made in particular phases of life; you can't have all the tattoos that you like done immediately, there is a particular sequence.

If a criminal has a tattoo done on his body which doesn't convey any real information about him, or has a tattoo done prematurely, he is severely punished, and his tattoo must be removed.

After having a particular experience, you describe it through the tattoo, like in a kind of diary. But since the criminal life is hard, tattoos are not said to be 'done', but 'suffered'.

'Look! I've suffered another tattoo.' The expression doesn't refer to the physical pain felt during the process of tattooing, but to the meaning of that particular tattoo and the difficult life that lies behind it.

Once I met a boy called Igor. He was always getting into trouble, and a lot of people regarded him as a hothead. He was the son of a Moldovan woman who worked in a factory and had no connection with the criminal life. She had been married to a Ukrainian criminal who had gambled and owed money to half the town. Then one day he had been killed – someone had cut his hands off and thrown him into the river, where he'd drowned. There was only one thing left of him: his son Igor.

His son was a lot like him in some respects – he stole money from his mother and then went and squandered it

playing cards; he did dirty little jobs for certain criminals of the Centre district, who used him in small-scale scams. Once he was caught at the market trying to steal the handbag of my friend Mel's mother. In revenge Mel had permanently disfigured and crippled him.

Anyway, this boy was eventually caught by the policemen of a Ukrainian town trying to rob an old woman by threatening her with violence. Since he was scared of going to prison for this kind of crime, which is despised by the criminal community, he made up an incredible story: that he was an important member of the Siberian community, the police were out to frame him and the old woman was in league with them. To lend his story added credibility, the idiot gave himself some tattoos while he was in a cell at the police station. Using a piece of wire and the ink from a biro, he scored some Siberian images on his fingers and hands, without even knowing their meaning.

When he got to prison he told his story, hoping his cellmates would believe him. But since the jails are usually full of experienced people who are capable of understanding the psychology of other human beings, they immediately became suspicious of him. They contacted the Siberian community, asking if anyone knew Igor and knew anything about his tattoos. The answer was negative. So they killed him, throttling him with a towel in his sleep.

Usurping someone else's tattoo is, for the Siberian tradition, one of the biggest mistakes you can make, and is punishable by death. But this is only true of an existing tattoo, which someone already has on them

and which represents codified personal information. By contrast, using the tradition to create tattoos for strangers is like giving them a lucky charm. Many people who do business with people who belong to the Siberian criminal community – friends and supporters – may wear traditional tattoos, provided that the person who tattooed them and prepared the design is a Siberian tattooist and an expert.

The relationship between the tattooist and his client is a complex one, and requires a separate explanation.

As well as being able to tattoo, create designs and read them on the body, the tattooist must know how to behave and how to follow certain rules. The process of requesting a job is a very long one. Before ‘suffering’ a tattoo, the criminal must be introduced to the tattooist by a friend who vouches for him – only if these conditions are met may the tattooist accept the job.

The tattooist may only refuse a client if he has grounds for being suspicious of him. In this case, he has the right to ask the criminal to contact a well-known Authority in Siberian society who can give him formal permission to be tattooed. The tattooist must, however, behave politely, so as not to offend anyone. He cannot talk about his suspicions, he must simply ask his prospective client to do him a favour – that of ‘taking some news’ to an old Authority. And even when the criminal reaches this Authority, he must never say straight out ‘I want permission to have a tattoo’, but only ‘Tattooist *x* requests permission to send you his greetings through me.’ In response, the Authority gives him a letter or sends one of his men to accompany him.

At this point, the tattooist, according to the criminal rule, may only refuse a job in the event of bereavement or serious illness. The criminal, for his part, cannot compel the tattooist to meet a deadline imposed by him – consequently, a large tattoo often has to wait for several years.

The methods of payment, too, follow a ritual. Honest criminals, as a matter of dignity, never speak of money. In the Siberian community all material goods, and particularly money, are despised, so they are never even mentioned. If the Siberians speak of money, they call it ‘that’, or ‘rubbish’, ‘cauliflower’, or ‘lemons’, or they simply specify the figures, pronounce the numbers. The Siberians do not keep money in the house because it is said to bring bad luck into the family – it destroys happiness and ‘scares off’ good fortune. They keep it near the house, in the garden, for example, in a special hiding place, such as an animal hutch.

So before beginning a tattoo they never mention a fixed price – they don’t mention anything connected with money. Only afterwards, when the work is finished, does the client ask the tattooist ‘What do I owe you?’ and the tattooist replies, ‘Give me what is right.’ This is the answer that is considered most honest, and is therefore most frequently used by the Siberian tattooists.

Free criminals pay well for the tattooist’s work: in money, weapons, icons, cars, and even property. In prison it’s different. There the tattooist will settle for a few cigarettes, a packet of tea or a jar of jam, a cigarette lighter or a box of matches, and occasionally a little money.

Among tattooists there is complete cooperation and a sense of brotherhood. When they are not in prison they go and visit each other and exchange the latest techniques.

In prison tattooists often share clients, because one may like doing one type of image, another a different type. Generally the older tattooist supervises the younger, coaches him a little and teaches him what he has learned in life. Many tattoos are done by more than one tattooist because criminals often change prison or cell. So the work begun by one tattooist may be continued by a second and finished by a third, but tradition requires that each subsequent tattooist ask the permission of the one who began it. And the process of asking is complicated. In the Siberian criminal community nobody ever asks for anything directly: there is a form of communication which satisfies people and takes the place of explicit requests. For example, if a new criminal with an unfinished tattoo arrives in a prison where a tattooist works, the tattooist asks him the name of the master who began that work. The new tattooist writes a letter in the criminal language, which finds its way, via the prisoners' secret postal system, known as the 'road', to the first tattooist. The letter appears to be extremely polite and full of compliments, but in fact it is very formulaic: it follows the principles of Siberian education. If this letter were read by a person who did not belong to the criminal world it would seem to him a jumble of incoherent words.

I've often written this kind of letter myself, both in prison and outside. I remember one particular case: I was serving my third sentence, by now an adult, when a Siberian criminal arrived in our cell who had a beautiful

tattoo on his back that needed finishing. It had been begun by a famous old tattooist, Afanasy 'Fog'. I had heard a lot about this legendary man. Apparently he had taken up tattooing quite late in life, at the age of about forty; previously he had been an ordinary criminal, a train robber. During a gunfight he had been shot in the head and left deaf and dumb. Suddenly he had started doing drawings which were considered far more than beautiful – they were perfect – and then he had learned how to tattoo. In a diary that he kept he explained it like this: he said he was constantly hearing in his head the voices of God and the angels suggesting to him iconographical subjects connected with Siberian Orthodox religion. This diary was very well-known in our community – people passed it around and copied it out by hand, as is customary in the criminal society with any document or testimony written by a person who is considered to be 'marked' by God. I had read it myself when I was a boy, my master had lent it to me and I had copied it out into an exercise book, and as I did so I felt I learned many things.

I had only seen examples of his work on two occasions and had been struck by how full of suffering those images were. He had an unusual technique. It wasn't very refined, in fact I'd say it was downright coarse, but he succeeded in creating forms and subjects which fed the imagination. They were different from all others. When you looked at them you didn't feel as if you were seeing a body with a tattoo on it; it was the tattoo itself that was a living thing, with a body underneath it. It was stunning – more powerful than any other thing I had ever seen on human skin.

I had long yearned to meet Fog, and I dreamed of finding a way of telling him about myself, and about my work.

The criminal who had come to our cell had a tattoo on his back called 'The Mother'; it was very complex and full of hidden meanings. Like all large tattoos, the Mother is the centre of a galaxy; within the design the meanings of the smaller images intersect and sometimes overlap, whirling around in a spiral until they enter the principal image and disappear at the very moment when the study of the details focuses the observer's attention on a single subject.

When the criminal asked me to finish the tattoo I couldn't believe it: to follow the lines traced by Fog would be an honour. At once I wrote a letter to him using all my knowledge of the rules that regulated relations between criminal tattooists:

Dear Brother Afanasy Fog,

The writer of this letter is Nikolay Kolima, with the help of the Lord and all the Saints a humble *kolshik*.

Praying to the icons, I hope all of us will continue to enjoy the blessing of the Lord.

Into the house which, thanks to Our Lord, I share with honest people, there has descended and, with the help of God, taken up residence an honest, orphan vagabond, Brother Z . . .

He holds, with the grace of the Lord, The Mother, which sings your miraculous hand, guided by God himself.

Through the love of Our Saviour Jesus Christ,  
The Mother is illuminated; not much is lacking to the  
completion of her splendour.

With brotherly love and affection, in the grace of  
Our Almighty Lord, I wish you good health and many  
years of love and faith in the Marvellous Siberian  
Cross.

Nikolay Kolima

I was simply asking him for permission to finish his work,  
but in order to do this I was using codified phrases which  
formed a kind of poetry with hidden meanings. Let me  
explain.

If a criminal calls another man *brother*, he does so not  
out of politeness, but to make him understand that he is  
not merely a member of the criminal society like him, but  
a colleague of his.

It is very important in the law of criminal com-  
munication to introduce yourself immediately – name,  
nickname and trade – otherwise the words that precede  
and follow have no importance.

*Humble kolshik* – that is, humble ‘stinger’ – is another  
way of describing the tattooist’s trade. The word *kolshik*  
is slang and ancient, and must always be accompanied by  
an adjective such as ‘humble’ or ‘poor’, which emphasizes  
the unambitious position, devoid of the least vanity, that  
is characteristic of those who carry on that trade.

After the official introduction comes a bridge-sentence,  
which doesn’t convey any concrete message with respect  
to the meaning of the letter. It is written in obedience to  
an ancient tradition – in any form of communication, the

important information must never be given immediately, but only after a short, 'transparent' passage which deals not with criminal affairs but with ordinary, mundane, obvious things. This section is used to express the state of mind of the person who is making the request, because any open display of emotion is not tolerated between criminals – even in the most difficult situations you must maintain your self-control, and keep, as they say, a cool head. In this case I wrote a sentence which conveyed a hint of religious hope, which is never a bad thing in letters, or indeed in any kind of communication between criminals.

After this you come to the point.

I say that in my cell, which is called a *house*, there has arrived – *descended* – a criminal, who *has taken up residence*, that is, has been accepted by the other criminals, *honest people*. Which means that the new arrival has a letter, safe-conduct or tattoo, the signature of an Authority.

I call the new arrival an *honest vagabond*, to indicate that he is an unambitious, humble person who knows how to behave.

*Orphan* is a word which in slang can have many meanings: in this case I was alluding to the fact that he had been forced to leave his previous prison. It was important to stress this in the letter, because criminals do not respect those who ask to be transferred – they call them 'mad horses', and say 'as soon as anything happens, these guys jump at the door like mad horses'.

After this I wrote that the new arrival *holds with the grace of the Lord*, which simply means that he has a tattoo. Among criminals it is not usual to say 'I have a

tattoo', you say 'I hold with the grace of the Lord', and then you specify which tattoo in particular you have; if you are referring to all the tattoos together you call them 'the honest seeds', 'the tears of the Lord', or 'His seals'. In this case *The Mother*, because that was the specific tattoo that the criminal had on his back.

*The Mother sings your miraculous hand* is a compliment to Fog. If a tattoo has been executed well, it sings the hand of the tattooist.

Then comes another, more significant compliment: Fog's hand is *guided by God Himself*. This is not to be taken in a literal sense – God in this case means the criminal law. The tattoo, that is, has been executed according to the rules of the criminal tradition, in a very professional manner.

The letter culminated in the words, *The Mother is illuminated*. This means that the tattoo, though unfinished, works perfectly. 'To illuminate' means to put hidden information into the tattoo itself, so I was saying that this element of the work was complete and there was no need to add or change anything; it was sufficient to put the finishing touches to it, to strengthen a line here and there, fill it out with nuances of colour, etc.

The phrase *not much is lacking to the completion of her splendour* is an indirect request for permission to continue the work.

Then come the traditional greetings and good wishes, and lastly the signature. In the Siberian tradition the surname is never used, only the first name and nickname, because belonging to a family is considered to be a private matter.

When I had finished the letter I was very pleased – it felt like a turning point in my life. I gave the letter to the people who organized the circulation of mail in our cell. They were obliged to stay at the window all the time and wait for a signal. The letters passed along strings from one window to another – if they were addressed to someone in that cell, they were delivered to the addressee, otherwise they continued to move on from cell to cell, and if necessary from prison to prison. The prison mail was far more reliable and speedy than the normal mail, which indeed nobody used. In the space of two weeks the letters would reach any prison in the region, and to travel right across the country it would take less than a month. The prison to which I was sending my letter was a long way away, so it would take time.

I waited anxiously for the reply. After two months and a few days, a boy broke away from the team of ‘postmen’, holding in his hand a small letter written on a leaf from a lined exercise book:

‘Kolima, it’s for you, from Afanasy Fog.’

I took the letter from his hands and opened it excitedly. Written on it, in a very rough, cramped hand, were the words:

Greetings, dear brother Nikolay Kolima, and long years in the glory of Our Lord!

I, Afanasy Fog, thanks to Jesus Christ a humble *kolshik*, will remember in my prayers you and all the honest vagabonds who live in this blessed Land.

In the glory of the Lord one breathes well, enjoying peace and His love.

The news of Brother Z . . . gives me immense joy, may the Lord bless him and send him long years, strength and health.

The Mother, who with the help of the Saviour Jesus Christ is illuminated, with his same help will be continued.

An embrace of brotherhood and affection to you; may Christ be with you and your family, and may He and all the Saints protect your blessed hand.

Afanasy Fog

I read it and re-read it again and again, as if searching for something else that might appear between the lines.

I was very proud that Fog had replied to me with such respect and love, as if we were friends and had known each other all our lives.

Many in the cell knew who Fog was, and as word got around my authority increased.

It took me four months to finish Fog's tattoo. One day my work happened to be seen by an old tattooist of the Black Seed caste called Uncle Kesya, who occasionally came out of the special security block to be given the medication he needed at the infirmary. Using his Authority, Uncle Kesya sent me a parcel, containing a packet of tea, cigarettes, sugar and a jar of honey. In the accompanying letter he paid me a lot of compliments and said he was pleased to see a job executed by a young man who hadn't abandoned the needles and the traditional techniques for the electric devices, which he called 'gobs of the devil'.

After that, many inmates, intrigued and moved by the respect the old man had shown me, started asking me

to tattoo them according to the old Siberian principles – even people who were remote from our tradition and who belonged to different castes. It was delightful to see how men whom I had previously thought profoundly different from me, and with whom I would never have imagined I could have any relationship, except a business one, became very friendly. They wanted to know about Siberian history and the system of tattoos, and this created a bridge between us, a connection founded solely on curiosity about another culture, without any sordid interest connected with criminal affairs.

During those days I told them a lot of the stories that I had heard as a child from my grandfather and from other old men. Many of my cellmates were simple men, who had been sent to prison for ordinary crimes – men with no underlying criminal philosophy. One of them, a strapping young man called Shura, was serving a five-year sentence for killing someone in obscure circumstances. He didn't like talking about it, but it was clear that jealousy had something to do with it – it was a story of love and betrayal.

Shura was a strong man and as such he was sought after by several criminal groups – in prison the Authorities of the castes or families always try to make alliances with people who are strong and intelligent, so that they can dominate the others. But he kept to himself, didn't take anyone's side and lived his sad life like a hermit. Now and then some member of the Siberian family would invite him to drink tea or chifir, and he would come willingly because, he said, we were the only ones who didn't invite him to play cards in order to cheat him and then use him

as a hitman. He spoke very little; usually he listened to the others reading their letters from home and sometimes, when somebody sang, he would sing too.

After the story of Fog's tattoo and my sudden fame, he took to spending more time with the Siberians; nearly every evening he would come to our bunks and ask if he could stay with us for a while. Once he arrived with a photograph which he showed to everyone. It was an old picture of an elderly man with a long beard, holding a rifle. He wore the typical Siberian hunting belt, hanging from which was the knife and the bag containing the lucky charms and the magic talismans. On the back of the photo was a note:

*'Brother Fyodot, lost in Siberia, a good and generous soul, an eternal dreamer and a great believer',* and a date: '1922'.

'That's my grandfather; he was Siberian . . . May I be part of the Siberian family, since my grandfather was one of you?' He seemed very serious, and his question was entirely devoid of vanity or any other negative feeling. It was a genuine request for help. Shura, it seemed, must be tired of living on his own.

We told him we would examine the photograph and ask some questions at home, to see if any of the old folk remembered him.

We didn't send the photo anywhere and we didn't ask anyone; during those years in Siberia lives were swallowed up in a great maelstrom of human history. We decided to wait a while and then take the giant Shura into our family – after all, he was quiet, he had already served two years without creating any problems, and we didn't see any

reason for preventing a human being from enjoying some company and brotherhood, if he deserved it.

A week later we told him he could enter the family, provided that he promised to respect our rules and laws, and we gave him back the photo, saying that unfortunately no one had recognized his grandfather. He thought about this for a while and then confessed, in a trembling voice, that the photo wasn't really his – he had got it from his sister who worked in some historical archive in a university. He apologized to us for deceiving us; he said he really liked us as people, and that that was why he was so keen on entering our family. I felt sorry for him. I understood that as well as being simple, he had a kindly soul, and there was nothing bad in him. In prison people like him usually died after a few months; the luckiest ones were used as puppets by one of the more experienced criminals.

We took pity on him.

'Shura has become one of us,' we announced that same evening, and everyone in the cell was very surprised. We allowed him to live with us, in the family, even though he wasn't a true Siberian, forgiving him because he had confessed his error.

He soon learned our rules; I explained everything to him as you might to a child, and he discovered them as children do, not concealing his astonishment.

When the time came for me to be released, he bade me an affectionate farewell and said that if it hadn't been for the story of the tattoo he would never have decided to join the Siberians, and would never have discovered our rules, which he considered just and honest.

‘Perhaps my humble trade has saved his life,’ I thought. ‘Without the family in prison he would have died in some brawl.’

To me tattooing was a very serious matter. To many of my young friends it was a game – they only had to see a few scrawls on their skin and they were satisfied. Others took it a little more seriously, but not very.

Conversations on the subject would go something like this:

‘My father’s got a big owl with a skull in its claws . . .’

‘An owl means a robber, I assure you . . .’

‘And what does a skull mean?’

‘It depends.’

‘I know. An owl with a skull means a robber and a murderer, I swear it does!’

‘Don’t talk rubbish! A robber and a murderer is a tiger’s face with oak leaves – my uncle’s got one!’

In short, everyone fired out theories at random.

For me, however, it was a very different affair, a complicated business. I liked subjects which left a trace of the hand that had made them. So I asked my father, my uncles and their friends to tell me about the tattooists they had known. I would study their tattoos, trying to understand what techniques they had used to create different effects. Then I would talk about them with my master, Grandfather Lyosha, who helped me to understand the techniques of others better and taught me to adapt them to my own way of seeing the

subjects, drawing them and tattooing them on the skin.

He was pleased, because he saw that I was interested in the subjects not just because of their links with the criminal tradition, but because of their artistic qualities.

Even during the preparatory phase of the drawings, I began to wonder, and to ask him, why each tattoo couldn't be understood exclusively as a work of art, irrespective of its size. My master used to reply that true art was a form of protest, so every work of art must create contradictions and provoke debate. According to his philosophy, the criminal tattoo was the purest form of art in the world. People, he would say, hate criminals, but love their tattoos.

I suggested it might be possible to establish a connection between high-quality art and the profound meaning – the philosophy – of the Siberian tradition. He would reply to me, with great confidence in his voice:

'If we ever reach the point where everybody wants to be tattooed with the symbols of our tradition, you'll be right . . . But I don't think that will happen, because people hate us and everything connected with our way of life.'

