

Kolyma Tales Study Guide

Kolyma Tales by Varlam Shalamov

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A Pushover Job, In the Night

A Pushover Job, In the Night Summary

A Pushover Job

The Siberian dwarf tree is able to bend down when snow and cold come. Its needles are collected as an alleged remedy for scurvy, a disease of vitamin C deficiency. The narrator is fascinated by the Siberian dwarf cedar tree. This tree senses when winter and snow are coming and is able to bend down at that time, on the ground. Around April, the tree would sense a thaw coming and rise up again. The dwarf cedar tree is always green and produces nuts for human and animal food. The narrator is in a gang that gathers dwarf cedar needles. These needles are boiled and used to make a bitter extract that is drunk to stop scurvy, but is actually ineffective. Collecting needles is an easy job compared to digging for gold in the mines. The narrator also likes the job because he and his companion go alone into the forest to get the cedar tree needles. They do not have any guards threatening them or bothering them. The narrator and his companion are in bad shape and it is extremely cold. They cannot make their quota, so they shove a large stone into the cedar needle bag. They are only fed bread and soup.

In the Night

Glebov and Bagretsov go out into the night. They are in bad shape but look forward to an opportunity to make some headway in their situation. They go to a site and remove stones and uncover the corpse of someone in the camp who died that day. Bagretsov cuts his hand while digging through the stones with his bare hands. Glebov notices that the blood takes a long time to stop and that Bagretsov has poor coagulation. Then it comes up that Glebov was a doctor before being sent to the Kolyma camps. Now, he realizes that his former profession means nothing in the camps. Bagretsov finds the body. It is big and young and this is the reason the body is in a shallow hole. The men take the underwear off the corpse and go off with it. They plan to sell it for bread or tobacco.

A Pushover Job, In the Night Analysis

A Pushover Job

The Siberian dwarf cedar tree can lie down in the winter and get up during the spring again, but it is doubtful how many human beings will survive the severe winter in the Kolyma camps. The dwarf cedar is a remarkable plant but it does not actually provide sufficient Vitamin C to cure scurvy among inmates. Scurvy is caused by Vitamin C deficiency. Luckily for the narrator and his companion, they can stick a rock in the needle bag to make it appear that they have made their quota. No one at the camp either checks for quality or quantity of the needles, nor do they care in the slightest. This is a typical Soviet problem, that quota is made in a general sense, but there is no



individual commitment to make sure the production is actually usable. It is like the factory that had to make 6,000 kilos of steel nails, and they produced 1,000 nails weighing 6 kilos each, instead of producing the size that is actually needed.

In the Night

Glebov and Bagretsov are people who have survived at least a year in the camp. They use their wits, including stealing underwear from corpses. Glebov was once a doctor in civilian life, but all his knowledge from that profession is now meaningless to him, since it has little relevance to his current ability to survive. However, if the two manage to sell the underwear, they can get goods that will actually help them to survive, at least for a couple of days.



Shock Therapy, In the Bathhouse

Shock Therapy, In the Bathhouse Summary

Shock Therapy

Merzlakov is having difficulty surviving. He is big and is not fed enough. First, he gets a job at the camp, in a stable. He hulls some of the oats for horses and eats adequately, but then he and others are busted since his former colleague is now the chief of the stable and knows the trick. Merzlakov is returned to the general work gang and sees his strength trickling away. Merzlakov sees how larger men like him die faster, because they are not given enough food. When he is sent to the mine, Merzlakov sees that he will soon die since he is not fed enough to tolerate the hard work and extreme cold. One day, he is carrying a heavy log and collapses. He is beaten by the guards and by other prisoners. He uses this beating as an unexpected opportunity to say that his back is broken, though his broken ribs heal quickly. He spends months in hospitals, with the hope of being sent home. Finally, a Dr. Peter Ivanovitch decides to expose Merzlakov's fakery. The Doctor is a former prisoner in the camps himself, but gets a sense of professional pride in exposing prisoners that are not really sick. He spends a lot of time exposing fakes, finding satisfaction in this nasty work. The Doctor does this by using his wits, since things like X-rays do not work properly in the hospital. With a "Rausch narcosis test," Merzlakov's broken back is exposed as a fake. Merzlakov's back is easily straightened while he is unconscious due to smelling ether fumes. He returns to the charade as soon as the test is over. Next, Merzlakov is shot up with camphor oil, which is a real case of shock therapy. He switches in involuntary spasms and has to be held down by a whole group of men. Next day, Merzlakov checks out of the hospital, cured.

In the Bathhouse

The bathhouse is a sort of tyranny for the political prisoners, which is not used in this way on the criminal prisoners. All political prisoners try to avoid it. Not enough time off from work is given for bathhouse visits, so it cuts down on the prisoner's sleep. The night before, prisoners have to stay up to cut firewood to heat the furnace of the bathhouse. There is a big mobilization of the camp bureaucracy on bathhouse day. The bathhouse is far away, and prisoners have to wait on line. Wasting time this way is a horror for the prisoners, since they are struggling to rest enough and stay alive after their back-breaking work in the gold mines. If it is too cold, the people wait inside, with clothed and naked men mixed together. The bath is not hot enough and no one really gets clean anyway. After, the men desperately try to get underwear their size, since none of the prisoners own their own underwear. Their outer clothes are wet and not really disinfected. The men lose their possessions in the barracks, which are cleaned by janitors while they are gone. All the little possessions that they have accumulated over weeks are stolen from them with no appeal.



Shock Therapy, In the Bathhouse Analysis

Shock Therapy

The prisoner Merzlakov is desperate to survive. He notices that the large horses in the stable where he works are fed better than human beings. He makes a crude sort of oatmeal, but is caught. He is sent to the hospital with a fake broken back after being beaten. For some reasons, prisoners are allowed to go to a hospital and get food and not work. The Soviets want to maintain at least an appearance of humaneness in their otherwise deadly prison camps at Kolyma. It is said that two million or more people die at Kolyma, but this is supposedly due to hard work, not a willful decision to kill them. Remarkably, Merzlakov is on the point of being sent home, till Dr. Ivanovitch takes him on. The Doctor is evil in his own technocratic way, getting pleasure in exposing fakes and sending them to their probable deaths. The Doctor justifies his actions as part of his role as a medical doctor. Both of his medical procedures, especially the camphor shot, not only expose that Merzlakov's back is not broken, but are tortures in themselves.

In the Bathhouse

In the Kolyma camps, normal pleasures like taking a bath become a horrible experience. It is acknowledged by the authorities that the inmates live in filth, and their bodies and clothing are full of lice. They are literally lousy. Inmates are forced to use the bathhouse two or three times a month. They hate it because it has become part of the torture that political prisoners must endure. The criminals do not go, or go when the place is empty.

Instead of being a time to get clean and avoid disease, the bathhouse day is a time to catch a cold, and lose all of one's possessions. The men live like today's urban homeless, who amass petty possessions for a couple of weeks and then lose them all. The men are already at the limit of their endurance, working 12-hour shifts in the frozen mines. On bathhouse day, they must wait around for hours more at the baths. The day before, they have to spend time cutting firewood for the baths.



Carpenters, Dry Rations

Carpenters, Dry Rations Summary

Carpenters

Potashnikov is on the verge of freezing to death. Potashnikov would like to stay alive, though there is little that he can do, as he is forced to work in the cold each day. He just saw another man die in his sleep, never waking up. Every day is 60-C degrees below, for the last two weeks. Potashnikov goes to the morning work line-up. A supervisor asks for carpenters, and Potashnikov and another man step forward. Both are intellectuals who know nothing about carpentry, but hope that they can fake it. They go to the carpentry shop and there is a very warm furnace there, making them comfortable. The two men are told by the supervisor to make thirty axe handles a day, which they have no ability to do. The supervisor finds out that they are not capable of good work within a few minutes but has mercy on them and does not kick them out immediately. They are allowed to stay for two days at the shop, and get warm. When they return to the regular camp, it is already warmer and the end of winter.

Dry Rations

The narrator and three other inmates have been sent to a cabin in the wilderness to clear a road. The men like the isolation and the ability to prepare their own food. The men also get to disinfect their underwear. They realize that their rations and strength are short and the foreman criticizes their efforts, but he only watches them for a while, then leaves, telling them he will return soon. Fedya is a teenage peasant, who knows how to do carpentry work and other handy jobs, but needs a chance to develop his bodily strength, since he is not fully grown. He is sent to Kolyma for slaughtering a sheep without authorization. Ivan Ivanovich is a hard worker but is now reaching the end of his strength. In camp, he is often beaten by guards and other prisoners. Savelev had been a loyal member of the Young Communists. He writes letters and makes some minor complaints to party officials, and mentions his complaints in letters to his fiancée. His continuous making of petitions to the authorities only succeeds in getting him a far harsher sentence in a prison camp.

The men try to take it easy as much as possible. Savelev tells other men about Moscow and city life, which is something he and the narrator spend much time discussing. Finally the foreman comes back and tells the men that they will have to return to the camp the next day. That night, Ivan Ivanovich hangs himself. This triggers a morbid though comic mood in Savelev, who jokes about jumping into his grave. The next morning, Savelev cuts off four of his fingers with an axe. The others return to camp, where Fedya writes a letter to his mother, hoping that he will be able to survive.



Carpenters, Dry Rations Analysis

Carpenters

Potashnikov is at the end of his rope. It is 60-degrees Celsius below zero, or -76F degrees, and he fears that death will come to him soon. Potashnikov volunteers to be a carpenter, knowing that he will be warm for a short time, at least. The man with him is also an intellectual, with no knowledge of carpentry. The trick is to stay alive one more day and hope that something turns up. If Potashnikov is really lucky, the other man who volunteers could teach him carpentry. No one normally teaches anyone anything in the camps. You either know what to do, or you suffer or die. Potashnikov is not lucky enough to be taught a new skill, but he does get warm. He has a chance to survive, when the weather warms up to -20C degrees, equivalent to -4F degrees, and he returns to the main work camp.

Dry Rations

The four men have a lot of hopes when sent into the wilderness to build a road, staying in a cabin. They hope they can kill wild animals and get extra food. Then they could work better and stay in the pleasant job road building. Two of the men, the narrator, and the teenage boy, Fedya, enjoy the break and survive, but the other two do not. Ivan Ivanovich sees that he will be beaten and die if he returns to the camp, so he commits suicide. Savelev cuts off four fingers, hoping to either die, or somehow survive by being excluded from work in the mines. For these two men, being kicked out of their pleasant summer cabin is the end of their life and hope. It is summer, conditions are better, but they cannot meet their quota because it is too high and their food supplies are still low. The tall trees in the north that fall down easily symbolize the tall and thin men who are easily broken and destroyed. The short trees that are too hard to cut symbolize people like Fedya and the narrator, who somehow have a better chance to survive. Shorter people need fewer calories and have a better chance to survive in the camps.



Sententious

Sententious Summary

The narrator is near death. He barely feels warmth from the person lying next to him. Then this bitter feeling of death eases, as the narrator recovers a bit. His conditions have improved because he is no longer a prisoner of the camps at Kolyma. He is in a camp, but it is some sort of internal exile camp for non-inmates. The narrator has an easy job chopping wood and boiling water. He is an ex-convict. People in his tent can shoot birds for food and there are guns always available. It is still winter and the narrator is in a big tent with others. He is not beaten and begins to gain weight. He begins to notice things, like men breathing at night, and the noises they make in their sleep. The narrator has new feelings, like concern for animals, and stops his workmate from shooting a bird. Suddenly, the narrator thinks of the word "sententious" and other big words from books and his academic life. Days pass, and the short, hot Siberian summer arrives. One day, the chief arrives from Magadan, and he is greeted by everyone in the camp. Symphonic music is played from a record player and there is a feeling of hopefulness in the air.

Sententious Analysis

The narrator is released from the convict camp, but is still in exile in the Kolyma region. He is in a little village, in a tent. There is a shotgun there, symbolizing that he is no longer a convict. Also, the narrator is not beaten, and fights when they break out are not endless sessions of guards beating inmates. They are merely short disagreements that end quickly, perhaps a few punches are thrown, but no one is badly hurt or killed. The narrator slowly becomes conscious of his environment and relaxes. He has an easy job, eats and gains weight, recovering his health. The last thing that comes back is his old vocabulary and education. Education is meaningless in the camps. At the end of the story, the symphonic music playing symbolizes a public return to civilized behavior. Everyone, the area chief, criminals and all, again respect ideas and thought, though the narrator still has not returned to his home in Moscow.



Prosthetic Appliances, Quiet

Prosthetic Appliances, Quiet Summary

Prosthetic Appliances

Six prisoners are sent to the punishment block. All are administrative workers charged with some plot. The men are stripped to their underwear, then, totally naked. The first must take off his steel prosthetic corset. The prisoner comments to the narrator that he knows the investigator, because he used to go to the house of prostitution that the investigator's mother ran. The investigator has the stable manager take off his artificial arm, who fights and screams and thus, loses his hot food privileges. The next prisoner is a doctor who has his hearing aid confiscated. The next man loses his prosthetic leg and the next checks in his artificial eye. The last man, the narrator, is naked, but though asked, will not give up his soul.

Quiet

The narrator is part of the weakest labor gang. In his gang are people who are former prominent officials in the Soviet Union who have been sentenced for "political crimes." One man, Dmitriev, is a member of a religious sect and constantly prays and sings. Dmitriev vaguely speaks about dying and reaching the time to be received by the Lord, but does not do anything to accelerate the process. One day the gang goes into the dining room and is fed a full meal of bread, kasha and cranberry dessert. After the second day of this the gang finds out this is due to a new "educator" in the camp, who believes they will work harder if they are fed properly. The area chief insists that it is a waste, and these are the bad people who do not work. The gang goes to work, and the sect member, Dmitriev walks out of the mine, knowing he will be shot, and is shot. He got enough extra strength to kill himself from the extra food. The area chief says that this proves that the gang is a bunch of loafers who cannot work.

Prosthetic Appliances, Quiet Analysis

Prosthetic Appliances

This story is really a long elaborate joke. In the Russian concentration camps, some prisoners become administrators. They are still in exile at Kolyma, and are accused of being involved in a plot, in the usual frenzy of investigations and accusations. Soviet Russia in the 1930s is hit by waves upon waves of accusations and trials for political crimes. Five of the prisoners have either artificial limbs, steel corsets to replace a bad back, or other prosthetics. The story is ironic, since the prisoners are administrators, usually the darlings of the camp. They do not have to be faced with physical wearing down and death in the hard labor and freezing temperatures of the mines. Yet now, in this crackdown, they lose their pride, are stripped naked and lose their artificial helping devices. The last man, the narrator, only refuses to give up his soul. Perhaps he will

give up his soul later, or refuse to, when told to sign some false confession of his crimes.

Quiet

In reality, Kolyma and its gold mines is a place where men are worked to death, while producing a little gold. However, once in a while, a new administrator comes to Kolyma and tries to treat the men better and at least feed them properly. There is extreme pressure against this type of experiment, and the minute something goes wrong, there are demands to halt it. Likewise, the men in this work gang are already so broken and near death that a few days of good food only gives the man who is a member of a religious sect enough extra strength to have himself shot.



Major Pugachov's Last Battle, On Tick

Major Pugachov's Last Battle, On Tick Summary

Major Pugachov's Last Battle

The political inmates who are sent to Kolyma in the 1930s are mostly passive Trotskyites. They do not work together and are easy to control and kill. After World War II, convict soldiers are sent to Kolyma, with some being more daring. These soldiers became prisoners of war to the Germans, and then after the war are classified as traitors to the Soviet Union, and sent to the camps. Major Pugachov and some of his fellow former soldiers realize their situation. The work in the mines is guaranteed to quickly destroy the health of any man. They know they have to act quickly before they lose their strength. They get administrative jobs in the winter to keep in good shape, and in the spring plot to escape. On the morning of the escape, a cook goes to a guardhouse for the kitchen keys, but then strangles the guard. Soon another is killed and there is an attack by 10 men on a guard's barracks. Weapons and food are grabbed and a truck is seized.

Unfortunately, the men do not get far, because the truck runs out of gas, and they take positions in the forest. Pugachov thinks how he was captured by the Germans, and after the war is sent to Kolyma by the Soviets, as he had been warned by the Russian turncoat, Vlasov of how the Soviets would treat returning prisoners. The group of escapees is soon found and surrounded in the Siberian forest. They are under fire and take casualties. It is a little war going on, with the Soviet guards taking 28 dead in the battle. One of the escapees, Soldatov is badly wounded and captured unconscious. When he recovers months later, he is shot. Pugachov somehow hides in a bear cave. He ends up shooting himself.

On Tick

Two criminals are playing cards in a barracks. The criminals are left alone to have their games, and it is the political inmates that are watched. The criminals use homemade cards. Seva is beating Naumov in the game. They bet their clothes, and Naumov is literally losing his clothes. Meanwhile, two political prisoners are chopping wood, having been given some soup and bread. Naumov wants to gamble more, on credit, but Seva gives him only a little credit. Then, Naumov asks the narrator to come over, because Naumov wants to seize more clothing with which to gamble. The narrator's quilted jacket is not wanted, because it is regulation issue clothing. The other political inmate has a wool sweater on under his jacket and is ordered to give it up. It is a prized possession from the inmate's wife and he refuses. The political inmate is stabbed to death by Naumov's orderly and Seva takes the sweater off the corpse. The game is over.



Major Pugachov's Last Battle, On Tick Analysis

Major Pugachov's Last Battle

The Soviets are so used to the malleable political prisoners that they are not prepared to deal with soldiers who have been sentenced to Kolyma. Soldiers like Pugachov and Soldatov are captured during World War II. When they are returned to the Soviet Union after the war they are considered traitors and often sent to slave labor camps like Kolyma. There they carefully plot their escape. Everything goes successfully in the camp, and the 12 men seize weapons and food. Their major bit of bad luck, is that the truck they seize has little gas and only gets them a short distance into the wilderness. They had hoped to make a longer distance and seize a plane at an airport. Then they could have flown to Japan, or perhaps even to Alaska. The men fight when the Soviet guards come to capture or kill them. They kill many guards, but are soon overpowered. Pugachov somehow finds a hideout. This symbolizes his strong connection to freedom, but in this case, his only chance of remaining free is to kill himself. Pugachov is the name of a Russian peasant who led a rebellion against the Czar and was executed in the year 1774, a historical association that must have been known to the author.

On Tick

The criminal element is the aristocracy of the camps, and the political prisoners are the slaves. Political prisoners are defined as those who are convicted under Article 58 of the criminal code, as hostile to the Soviet state. The criminal Seva is described as having the hands of a man who does not work, with long fingernails, a classic symbol of the idle leisure class. The political prisoner who refuses to give up his sweater is thoughtlessly murdered by Naumov's orderly, in order to get the sweater. No one cares that the political prisoner is murdered, and nothing is done about this crime.



A Piece of Meat, The Snake Charmer

A Piece of Meat, The Snake Charmer Summary

A Piece of Meat

Golubev is a political prisoner with a comfortable staff job. He fears being thrown back into hard labor and death when the year end "commission" comes to the area. The commission examines whether political prisoners are in soft jobs not permitted to them. The commission officers throw out the political prisoners from their jobs if they are on the list. Golubev sees a case where a man is sent back to the mining camps and his likely death. If the man had an attack of appendicitis, he could have avoided being sent to hard labor. Golubev, several months later, is ordered to go on the bus back to the camps. He fakes an attack of appendicitis. An operation is done to take out the little organ, a special "pound of flesh."

Golubev is recovering and wonders if he should try to infect his wound, to stay in the hospital more. Then, he recognizes a known criminal, Kononenko, in his ward, who is known to strangle people. Murderers are not executed at this time, only political inmates. The murderer goes through a cycle in which he murders someone, is put on trial, and then after a period of rest, goes and kills someone again. The murderer is going under the name, Kazakov. Golubev fears that he or another man in the ward will be murdered. The other man, Podosenov, deliberately puts drops of his own blood in a urine sample, so doctors will think he has some disease. Kononenko gets a note and complains that he has no time to murder Golubev or the other man, because he has to get into a criminal fight going on in the mine. After dinner, Kononenko leaves.

The Snake Charmer

Platonov is a former movie screenwriter who survives for a year in a horrible mine, by telling stories and novels to the criminal element. Platonov dies before he can write down his story, which the narrator tells. Platonov is at a mine for the first day. In the barracks, the criminals are playing cards. He goes to sleep, but is woken up by them. Fedya, the gang leader, hits Platonov, and sends him to a stinking corner. Platonov knows that he must obey the criminals, since he has seen them strangle prisoners with towels after some petty dispute. Platonov is woken later and told to do errands. Finally, he is asked if he can recite novels. Platonov thinks that it is a rotten assignment, but decides to do it. He tells the gangsters a story about "The Club of Black Jacks" and a crime committed, which the gang leader thoroughly enjoys. He is fed and given a smoke, and from now on, he is protected by the gang.

A Piece of Meat, The Snake Charmer Analysis

A Piece of Meat



Golubev is trying to survive. He gets out of being sent to hard labor by having his appendix surgically removed. He is giving up his "piece of meat," or as Shakespeare had Shylock call it in the play "Merchant of Venice," a "pound of flesh," in order to survive. In the recovery room, unexpectedly, Golubev is confronted with Kononenko, a known serial murderer. The criminals can literally get away with murder, because the rage of the Soviet system is set against the political offenders, not the criminals. Golubev insists that he does not know Kononenko, who to make matters worse, is now under the name Kazakov. Golubev only avoids being strangled with a towel, because Kononenko has to get back to a fight for his murderous gang in the mines. Whether Kononenko/Kazakov strangles Golubev is almost irrelevant to him. Golubev, the political prisoner, is just a piece of meat.

The Snake Charmer

Platonov tells the narrator the story of how he survives a horrible mine, with very difficult working conditions, called Jankhar. Platonov likens telling stories and novels to the criminals to being a snake charmer who charms snakes. As in other places in the camps, the criminals have already shown that they can kill without being punished. The criminal Fedya hits Platonov, who cannot find a place to sleep. Platonov is told to do chores and sleep by the human waste bucket. The criminals are bored by their own brutality, however, and are looking for some distraction. There is a limit to what they can possess and steal in the camps. The gang leader, Fedya, first wants his heels scratched, and then decides that he wants to hear a story. He wants drama, novels, and has Platonov woken again and asked if he can tell stories. Platonov is offended. He feels like the court jester in Milan, in the Verdi opera Rigoletto, who symbolizes the ultimate court buffoon who amuses the rulers. Platonov decides to tell a novel, and survives the year in Jankhar, while other political prisoners die, because the criminals give him extra food and clothing. They can even arrange for Platonov to get time to take a nap during his work hours. The "snakes," that is, the gangsters that Platonov charms, have the power of life and death over the political prisoners.



The Chief of Political Control, A Child's Drawing, The Injector

The Chief of Political Control, A Child's Drawing, The Injector Summary

Chief of Political Control

The new Chief of Political Control is visiting a hospital. He and his staff are checking a ward of 80 patients in the surgical block. He is on a crackdown against the practice of guards beating patients and breaking their bones. None of the patients will talk, since they will be in trouble if they talk, and the Chief will be faraway and unable to protect them. The Chief complains that all the "cursing and yelling" comes from the leadership, and that Stalin, the dictator, wants this all stopped. This creates a shudder in the hospital staff, who thinks that the man may be acting on orders directly from the great Stalin. The Chief then asks for a glucose injection, but none of the regular staff are competent to do it. The narrator, a convict orderly, volunteers to give the injection. The Chief refuses an offer to eat dinner, and leaves.

A Child's Drawing

A gang of inmates is cutting wood, a relatively easy job. They finish the work, but then see a garbage pile to search through. They find some discarded food and one man finds some socks. The narrator finds a child's notebook with pictures of a Northern Siberian town. These pictures are colored with watercolors. The town has lots of barbed wire and soldiers with rifles. The colors in the North are clear and bright. This is explained by a story that God created the North when he was a child and could not use complicated colors. The narrator's companion throws the notebook back into the pile.

The Injector

A mine engineer writes a letter that an injector machine, which is supposed to melt the frozen ground with boiling water, no longer works. Therefore, in the 60-C degree below zero cold, the convict gang cannot do any work. Over the report is written that the "Convict Injector" should be imprisoned and punished, and replaced with a civilian employee.

The Chief of Political Control, A Child's Drawing, The Injector Analysis

The Chief of Political Control



The new Chief of Political Control wants to crack down on cases of guards beating prisoners and breaking bones, but no one takes him seriously. The practice of beatings is an intrinsic quality of the camps. Since the convicts are under a system of terror, at least those convicted of political offenses, any protest will lead to retaliation against them. Almost all the cases of broken bones are caused by beatings done by guards. Still, it is a valid thing to investigate, but more interesting to investigate is the incompetence of the civilian hospital staff. All of the civilian personnel are incompetent to do something even as simple as giving an intravenous injection. The convict orderly is able to do it. It would be better, at least according to the author, if the political convicts run the hospital.

A Child's Drawing

The child's notebook touches the narrator's heart, as he remembers that he used to draw and paint when he was a child. Yet, he finds the pictures frightening when he realizes that the child, though a civilian, has to live with barbed wire, fences and armed guards, all over his town. The child is from a civilian family, where the parents must work in the administration of the concentration camps of the North. Even the climate and the trees and vegetation of the North are stark. There are only a few months of summer's green and after that, long months of snow and intense cold. Of course, all these thoughts and emotions mean nothing to the narrator's companion, who crumples the notebook and throws it back into the garbage pile. It would have value only if the paper could be used to roll cigarettes.

The Injector

This is a satire of the typical idiocy of camp life, where a gang of convicts is asked to produce broken-up rock, to sift through for gold, although the conditions are impossible. The arctic cold has frozen everything and the convicts are deprived of a fire, or a working injector machine. The answer of the official in charge is that the machine itself, the Injector, should be punished. This is an example of the official's hatred and disdain for the convicts, as he makes the usual complaints that the convicts are good for nothing and refuse to work.



Magic

Magic Summary

Golubev is meeting with his chief, Stukov, who is a straight-forward man who is not cruel. Stukov likes to talk to people, including convicts, about new inventions. When Stukov wants to pick out carpenters from a new delivery of convicts, he can by looking at them. He can tell which ones are the peasants and is even able to know which are good clerical workers. Sometimes Stukov hesitates, but then when he gets another transport of prisoners, he again chooses the ones who can assist him in the camp. Stukov then receives an order to pick out the men who used to work in the secret police, who are also non-political prisoners. This is a very unusual request, and 2,000 men are silent when it is asked. One man steps out and says he worked as an informer. Stukov tells him to get the hell out of there, in a gleeful manner.

Magic Analysis

This is a joke story. Stukov is asked to pick out prisoners who worked for the secret police. He probably hates the secret police, since he does not take bribes and has normal relations with convict prisoners. Stukov is an honest man, described as detesting drunks as well. It should be remembered that, at Kolyma, skilled jobs such as carpenters, or desk jobs, such as clerks, are highly desired, since it is a way to get out of the work gangs in the mines. The work in the mines is the most dangerous and deadly, so prisoners are willing to say they even worked for the secret police, in order to get a desk job.



My First Tooth

My First Tooth Summary

The narrator, named Sazonov, is a prisoner who is marching in a column of prisoners in the Urals. Sherbakov is the chief of the guards and watches the prisoners carefully. The column stops in a church basement where the men are nearly suffocated. The next day the men sleep at some peasant huts for the night. A tall man, Peter Zayats, is beaten by the guards for not standing at attention for roll call, before the men turn in for the night. The narrator steps out and objects to the beating, to the shock of Sherbakov. The narrator goes to sleep in a hut, but is awakened and made to stand outside in the cold, naked. He is then told to dress, and is knocked down and kicked in the teeth. A tooth falls out. Later, he is asked if he has any complaints, and of course he says no. Sazonov gives it an alternate ending, where he is turned into the commander over Sherbakov. Another possible ending is that he finds the sectarian, Peter Zayats, next year, totally physically broken.

My First Tooth Analysis

The narrator is in a prisoner column marching through the Urals, at the western end of Siberia. Their treatment is already difficult, with hundreds of men stuffed in a church basement for the night, barely able to breathe. The narrator feels forced to intervene to stop the beating of a religious sect member. He is likely a new political prisoner. That is why, when first beaten, it is like the child that loses its first baby tooth while growing up. For his pains, the narrator may have stopped the beating of the sectarian, but later that night, his tooth is knocked out. It is not stated, but implied, that Sherbakov, the chief of the guards, goes to knock the tooth out with his boot. This story shows the brutality of the guards towards prisoners even in an area of the Urals, not extremely far from Moscow. In isolated Kolyma, the brutality of the administration is that much greater. An underlying theme of the story is the closing of churches and the persecution of religious people in the Soviet Union.



The Lawyer's Plot

The Lawyer's Plot Summary

The narrator is taken from his shift in the gold mine. He has a pretty lenient gang, though it is extremely cold. The narrator, Andreev, is a law student and is brought in for questioning by the local NKVD, secret police head, Romanov. Romanov is satisfied that Andreev was a law student, and declares that he is classified as a lawyer. Andreev is brought in for questioning and is moved to another prison, and in the morning is questioned by Romanov again. Romanov gives Andreev some bread, herring and some smoking mixture. Andreev is quite happy since he is getting to rest and eating well. He is able to think only about one day in advance in planning his prison life. Andreev is then brought by guards to the "Serpentine," a pre-trial prison with a sinister reputation. Andreev is kept moving to other prisons.

In a cafeteria, another convict says that he has been sentenced to be shot. Andreev is worried, and wonders if this will be his fate as well. He is taken to a frozen prison. In Magadan, Andreev is taken to the Director. Then, he is taken to Captain Rebrov, who confirms that Andreev is a lawyer. Andreev knows one person mentioned in the "conspiracy," but not the other. Captain Rebrov is investigating a lawyer's conspiracy. Andreev is finally put in the cell with one of the supposed leaders of the conspiracy, who as a government administrator tried to help an old school friend imprisoned in the camp. This is the origin of the strange accusation that there is some sort of wide-ranging lawyer's plot. Then Captain Rebrov is arrested, and everyone else is released and returned to their places.

The Lawyer's Plot Analysis

The narrator is in a pretty lenient gang, though it is extremely cold. The narrator, prisoner Andreev, is a law student and is brought in for questioning as a lawyer to the local NKVD headquarters, the secret police. Andreev sleeps in the town prison and in the morning is brought back to the investigator, Romanov, who gives food and smoke to Andreev.

Andreev is trucked around to various prisons. At a cafeteria along the way, where Andreev and his escorts stop, another convict says that he is sentenced to be shot. In Magadan, the capital of Kolyma, Andreev is taken to the NKVD director, and then to Captain Rebrov. Andreev recognizes the name of one ringleader of the alleged conspiracy, but not the other. He sleeps for 24 hours, and is finally put in a cell with this alleged conspirator, Partentiev. He finds out that Capt. Rebrov is saying that there is a lawyer's plot. Suddenly, Captain Rebrov is arrested, and everyone else has charges against them dropped.



Andreev, the narrator, is taken away from his work and interrogated. He is taken to Magadan, and fears that he is about to be shot, though he is so numbed by the cold and his weakness that he barely can think more than a day in advance. In a Kafkaesque situation, Andreev gradually finds out what crimes he is being charged with. The investigators are friendly and give him food when they find out he is a lawyer, and at first Andreev thinks that he is getting some type of a reward, not a punishment. Gradually he finds out that he is supposed to be part of a lawyers' plot. What actually happened is that one man was caught trying to help a prisoner who was his old school friend, perhaps from law school.

Andreev is totally shocked to see a real office and people properly dressed and not suffering from frostbite. When he gets the chance, he sleeps for 24 hours, because he is totally exhausted. Finally, Captain Rebrov, the chief investigator, is arrested and all new charges are dropped. Any new sentence, outside of a firing squad, is irrelevant, since all the prisoners already face death by exhaustion and disease in the camps. Obviously, the whole case of the lawyers' plot is a figment of the imagination of Captain Rebrov.



Lend-Lease, Condensed Milk

Lend-Lease, Condensed Milk Summary

Lend-Lease

The Lend-Lease gifts from the United States begin to change Kolyma. Lots of things are looted by the administration, from food to clothing, but the prisoners begin to get more food. Spam luncheon meat is mixed into their soup, and adds to their nutrition. Tons of tasteless white bread adds to their caloric intake and saves lives of people otherwise destined to starve to death. Transportation in the camps improves with the arrival of huge American trucks. Prisoners eat glycerin, which is called "American honey," and even machine grease, before being told that it is for a machine. A tractor arrives, but can only be driven by a non-political criminal. However, instead of moving logs, the tractor is used to carry bodies buried in a shallow grave to a much deeper pit. The corpses are from 1938, years ago, but because of the permafrost, the bodies are still preserved.

Condensed Milk

Shestakov has an easy office job as a geologist, while the narrator has to work in the mines. The narrator is watching criminals buy bread, when Shestakov calls him over. Shestakov says that he wants to escape, even though he and the narrator both know that this is virtually impossible. The narrator wonders if it is a set-up, but agrees to go if he gets some food. Shestakov gets him two cans of condensed milk, which the narrator eats with relish, while the other inmates stare, inside one of the camp barracks. The narrator, after eating, says he cannot go on the escape. The narrator would like to warn others not to go on the escape, but feels unable to talk. Five people go with Shestakov, and two are killed, while the other three are put on trial. Shestakov is caught, but not given additional charges, and restored to his old job.

Lend-Lease, Condensed Milk Analysis

Lend-Lease

The Lend-Lease aid from the United States enriches the guards, but some items cannot help get to the inmate population. The extra food helps to keep people alive and the machines from America make work easier. The first task of the tractor, however, is to move years-old bodies to a deeper pit. This symbolizes how the most important job of the Kolyma camps is not production, but to kill people and conceal their deaths. Moving them may hide the dead better, but in the permanent frost of Kolyma, the bodies will not decay. The narrator does not know how these people died, because he has been surrounded by guard towers. The guard towers in turn remind the narrator of the towers of Moscow that represent the tyranny and dictatorship of the Soviet government.

Condensed Milk



The narrator is envious of Shestakov's easy life, but maybe it is not so easy after all. Shestakov asks the narrator to escape, and actually escapes, only to be caught again. Shestakov is working in his profession as a geologist. In the prison he has access to good food. Shestakov asks the narrator to go with him in a group of escapees. Is Shestakov an administrative agent, who lures inmates to punishment and death, by having them escape? The narrator is worried about a trap, because Shestakov may have to fake an escape in order to keep his office job. The narrator gets the canned milk, though he decides to not go. Sure enough, Shestakov survives the escape attempt, and is not punished while the others die and are punished. So it seems that Shestakov is an administration plant. Escape from the cold seas and mountains of Kolyma is virtually impossible in any case.



Esperanto

Esperanto Summary

Skoroseev becomes a watchman. He also volunteers to do all sorts of things for the camp administration, like skin a dead horse. He and the narrator are in a gold prospecting group. Civilian clothes are seized by the authorities, in one of the periodic crackdowns. This causes anguish and damage to the inmates and angers the narrator. He comments that the administration is worse than the criminal prisoners. His chance remark of outrage is reported to the administration by Skoroseev. Soon after, the narrator is shipped off to a more difficult work group in the mines, while Skoroseev remains in the prospecting group.

Later, at an acting performance, the narrator hears that Skoroseev is an Esperantist and is a known government informer, who betrayed his whole group to the authorities. All those involved are sent to prison for espionage. After the narrator is released, he is still stuck in Kolyma, in Magadan. He is waiting in a freezing bus station, when he sees Skoroseev. Skoroseev has built a house and is married. Then, in the morning Skoroseev, after acting friendly, charges the narrator for sleeping at his house the last night.

Esperanto Analysis

Skoroseev is one of the feared people in Soviet society, a state informer. He informs on his whole group of speakers of Esperanto, an artificial language. At some point, Skoroseev falls out of favor with the authorities and must struggle to survive. He becomes an informant, squealing on the narrator for a chance remark after the inmates clothing is confiscated. Apparently, Skoroseev remains an informer, even after being released from the camps. He gets a loan, marries and builds a house in Magadan, Kolyma. There he can go to the bus station and spy on released prisoners and old acquaintances. If there is no useful information to be gotten from the people he meets, Skoroseev can at least charge them for sleeping a night or more in his house, or perhaps even recruit them as well to be informers.



The Train

The Train Summary

The narrator is returning home to Moscow. He gets off the train in the town of Irkutsk, which is his first large town since leaving Kolyma, and much larger than Yakutsk. In Yakutsk he split up from his traveling companions. He buys underwear and walks through stores, and buys other personal items. The narrator looks at books in a bookstore, which he misses, and walks back to the train station. There he is approached by a criminal gang. The narrator is asked who he is and he tells them he is from Kolyma, where he was a paramedic. One of the gang members vouches for the narrator, and he is let go, since this breaks the rage of the gang, at least for the time being. The narrator buys a ticket to Moscow and boards the train. On the train, a Lieutenant vomits near the narrator on the crowded train, then goes to sleep. Another man is covertly bringing farm goods into Moscow and selling them, bringing back winter items to sell at home. A prostitute sets up shop on the train, and the narrator thinks that perhaps she was turned into a prostitute in the Kolyma camps. The Lieutenant recovers from his drunkenness and plays a game with the narrator, guessing people's profession by merely looking at them. A young father and a child run around the train car. The narrator finds out that the child's mother is staying behind in Kolyma, while the man has decided to escape Kolyma with his young son. Another drunken passenger falls out of his berth and has to be taken out by ambulance. Even the criminal who protected the narrator appears. The criminal says he only wants to see his family. The narrator makes it to Moscow, and is met by his wife, whom he has not seen in 17 years.

The Train Analysis

The narrator is free and returning to Moscow, but he still must deal with problems and dangers. His friends that travel with him until Yakutsk have gone their separate ways. Perhaps they are afraid that if they stick together too long this could be a cause for suspicion from the authorities. It is part of a near universal feeling of paranoia. The criminal gangs are also a danger at the Irkutsk train station. Though sub-machine guns and soldiers are around, they cannot control the huge crowds there. A gang is debating whether or not to rob the narrator when he returns to the station. Like at Kolyma, the criminals have a lot of freedom to act, but one of them speaks in favor of the narrator. The gang likes to pretend that their prey has offended them, to feed their rage while they steal and attack people. The narrator escapes unharmed and gets on the train. On the train, the narrator meets people trying to sell goods, though this is not permitted under the Soviet rules. Other people are drunk, trying to escape reality. A little boy and his young father are running around the train car. This symbolizes to the narrator the drive to be free of the Kolyma prison camps. Though the child's mother stays in Kolyma, the father and son escape the more subtle shackles of Kolyma, even for people who have been released from the camps.



The Used-Book Dealer

The Used-Book Dealer Summary

The narrator is working as an orderly in a hospital in Kolyma. He and a man with a reddish trace of a beard are sent to Magadan, to take a paramedic course. There the narrator finds out that the man with the reddish-beard is a former NKVD secret police official whom the narrator calls "Captain Fleming." This is because this man is the only one in the paramedic course who knows that the discoverer of penicillin is named Fleming. Fleming has found out about how chemicals were used to break the wills of star prisoners and get confessions in the political show trials in the Soviet Union, in the 1930s. The prisoner's will is broken by the use of chemicals, without the use of torture. Then it is possible to have the accused confess to crimes as arranged beforehand, in a public court.

Some operatives of the secret police prefer physical torture and sleep deprivation, while others prefer using chemicals to break prisoners. Fleming, in his role in the secret police, used to monitor the intelligentsia of literature and the arts. Fleming studies culture and learns to play cultural games. Then Fleming is thrown into the prison camps by the more brutal types, who prefer the use of torture to psychological games. Fleming feels cheated out of his career in the secret service, instead being sent to the camps. In Kolyma, Fleming is hated because his former role in the NKVD is suspected. This is confirmed when somehow he follows a Spanish woman to the Kolyma women's mine to get some sort of information. Normally, it is impossible for prisoners to pass through official checkpoints by themselves, so Fleming must have had permission from the authorities.

When Fleming is released he has to wait to be allowed back in his hometown of Leningrad and receive his pension. His wife even meets him in Magadan, the capital of Kolyma. Fleming gets a job in a second-hand bookstore because he thinks this still involves him with the intellectuals. Fleming meets and talks to the narrator in a café, where he fantasizes being returned to his former position, half in jest. He gets his Communist party membership back, but he is unable to have the clause removed that says his membership was interrupted. At the end of the story the narrator gets a letter from Fleming. Fleming's wife has died and he feels totally lost what to do now, though he hopes to recover his zest for life.

The Used-Book Dealer Analysis

The story of "Fleming" illustrates the ambiguities of the Soviet system. Fleming was a willing agent of the secret police and would like to continue to be one. Fleming reveals the use of drugs to break the will of political prisoners and make them cooperate in their public trials. He knows that Fleming is the name of the discoverer of penicillin, but did "Fleming" discover chemicals to brainwash prisoners? Yet, somehow, Fleming still is



imprisoned for political crimes. His story illustrates a major failing of the Soviet system. Fleming is a total follower of the Soviet state, trained to be a cultural manipulator and controller. When the secret police policy changes from manipulation of culture to total brutal torture and suppression of cultural figures, then Fleming has no more purpose to the State. He is sent to Kolyma to face death, but it seems that he still has some pull with the authorities. Fleming is in an easy job as an orderly in the hospital. Somehow Fleming gets clearance to visit a Spanish communist woman in her mine, and this must have been given to him by the authorities. He still dreams of being totally accepted again in the Communist party, and cries and complains when his reinstated membership still says that it had been "interrupted." Even as an employee in a second-hand book shop he can pretend to somehow be of future service to the secret police in their games with intellectuals. This includes his conversations and comments to the narrator as well, where he acts as a manipulator and possible informant. On top of this, his wife dies after spending years trying to help Fleming and going to his aid all over the Soviet Union.



Characters

The Narrator appears in A Pushover Job

The narrator is out with a companion on a job to collect the needles of the Siberian dwarf cedar tree. They are both exhausted and in bad shape, and the narrator looks at it as a big break to be on the assignment of collecting needles.

Glebov appears in In the Night

Glebov goes out with his companion at night, to dig up a corpse of someone that died that day, and steal the underwear. Glebov was a doctor before being sent to the camps. Now, he realizes that, in his present situation, his medical knowledge is totally useless.

Merzlakov appears in Shock Therapy

Merzlakov is a large man who has survived a year and a half in the camps. He is now desperately trying to avoid the mines with their back-breaking work and short rations. He is very stubborn in keeping up his charade of a broken back, even when he is being exposed.

Potashnikov appears in Carpenters

Potashnikov pretends to be a trained carpenter, in order to get warm for a while and stay alive. He is desperate to stay alive, as this is his last chance to avoid the killing cold.

Savelev appears in Dry Rations

Savelev is a former Young Communist League leader, who does not understand how he was sentenced to the camps. He is very cynical, but collapses when Ivan commits suicide.

Ivan Ivanovich appears in Dry Rations

Ivan Ivanovich is a good worker who has been worn down physically by the hard labor in the mines. Now, in his weakness, he is beaten in the camps. He gets a reprieve by being sent to the woods to build a road.



Fedya Shapovappears in Dry Rations

Fedya is a teenager from a farm background. He is sent to the camps for the illegal slaughtering of one of his own sheep. He is only a teenager, but probably has the best chance of surviving.

The Narratorappears in Sententious

The narrator is gradually recovering from his loss of strength in the mines. Now he is free, but still in exile in a work camp for exiles where he cuts firewood and makes a fire. He is discovering the freedoms of not being a prisoner anymore.

The Topographerappears in Sententious

The topographer wants to shoot a bird while out with the narrator, but the narrator does not let him. Nevertheless, he does not make trouble; he does not report the narrator for disturbing him.

Dimitriev, the Religious Sectarianappears in Quiet

Dimitriev, the sectarian, is a member of the so-called "God knows" sect and refuses to answer to his name at roll call. He, like many other religious people, is persecuted. He sings and prays all the time.

Major Pugachovappears in Major Pugachov's Last Battle

Major Pugachov is a jailed Russian army officer, who leads an escape from the Kolyma prison camp. He is a determined man who previously escaped from a Nazi German prison camp.

Sevaappears in On Tick

Seva is a criminal, master card player and cheater at cards.

Naumovappears in On Tick

Naumov is a violent man, and convicted railroad thief. He is the victim of the card shark, Seva.



Garkunov appears in On Tick

Garkunov is a political prisoner who is ordered to give up his sweater. He thinks of his wife, who gave it to him, not of his danger in defying the criminals.

Golubev appears in A Piece of Meat

Golubev is a clever political prisoner who is scheming about how to avoid hard labor in the mines. His scheme works but faces him with unforeseen difficulties. He is cool under pressure.

Kononeko, Kazakov

Kononenko and Kazakov are two names that a single criminal and murderer uses. He periodically murders a political prisoner, stands trial and rests in the hospital. This criminal openly brags of his ability to murder people without remorse.

Platonov appears in The Snake Charmer

Platonov is a former movie scriptwriter who is a political prisoner. He ends up reciting novels, such as "The Club of Black Jacks" to the criminal element and thus gains food and protection. He has the ability to remember his former life and not be overwhelmed by his present misery.

Fedya, the Criminal Leader appears in The Snake Charmer

Fedya is a criminal leader in the barracks, and is playing cards. He turns to Platonov to provide entertainment and to relieve his boredom. He is brutal, but also suffers from the unhappy camp life.

Chief of Political Control appears in Chief of Political Control

The new Chief of Political Control is a naive man who thinks that a system of slave labor can be affected by his complaints against beating of convicts, even if he has the backing of Stalin. He does not realize that he is totally manipulated by the hospital staff. The prisoners dare not tell him what is really going on.



Stukov appears in Magic

Stukov is a camp section boss who needs to pick out carpenters, clerks and men with other skills, and can do so just by looking at them. He is a fair man and not brutal. He seems to have his own resentments against the police state.

Sherbakov appears in My First Tooth

Sherbakov is the head guard who is directing a column of prisoners in the Urals. He controls a group of loud and young guards. He seems a fair man, but he can be brutal in enforcing his power.

Peter Zayats appears in My First Tooth

Peter Zayats is a religious sect member who refuses to respond to roll call. Like many religious in the Soviet Union, he is brutally persecuted, but will not bend to the regime.

Romanov appears in The Lawyers' Plot

Romanov is the prison camp member of the secret police, the NKVD, who calls Andreev in to interrogate him on certain matters. He is friendly and gives gifts to the prisoner, who then may be executed shortly.

The Narrator, Prisoner Andreev appears in The Lawyers' Plot

The Narrator, Prisoner Andreev, is taken out of his group going to the mines, and is asked if he is a lawyer. Then he is taken for a trip for further legal processing. He only thinks day to day. He enjoys today's food, and does not worry about tomorrow's firing squad.

Captain Rebrov appears in The Lawyers' Plot

Captain Rebrov is the originator of the theory that there is a "Lawyers' Plot" and who orders a group of prisoners who are lawyers to be arrested. He merrily searches out all the possible lawyers in the camp.



Shestakov appears in Condensed Milk

Shestakov is a prisoner who is allowed to work in his trained profession, as a geologist, and he has special privileges. He is a resentful man, who does not like to give a gift, however small, without getting something.

Skoroseev appears in Esperanto

Skoroseev is an Esperantist, and a chronic informer for the Soviet authorities. Though the privileges he wins are small, he is happy to survive at the expense of others.

The Narrator appears in The Train

The narrator is in Irkutsk and is heading back to Moscow to be reunited with his wife. He has faced the horrors of the camps, and now faces the dangers of the train in a calm fashion.

The Father and Son appears in The Train

The father and son on the train are very happy together. The young father is with his two-year old son. The father has just been released from Kolyma and gotten himself and his son out of the area. He also has had to abandon his wife who stays in the Kolyma area.

Fleming appears in The Used-Book Dealer

Fleming is a former member of the Soviet secret police, the NKVD. He is in Kolyma and meets the narrator in a paramedic course. Fleming is released and still thinks about resuming his work with intellectuals and his work in the secret police. He has a certain shamelessness in trying to win back a bit of status.



Objects/Places

The Siberian Dwarf Cedar Tree appears in A Pushover Job

The Siberian Dwarf Cedar Tree lays down when it senses the winter coming on. The prisoners pick its needles, which are used to make a vitamin extract.

Underwear appears in The Night

Prisoners try to obtain extra underwear, which they can sell for food or tobacco.

Ether appears in Shock Therapy

Ether is given in drops and inhaled form to patients. A large amount of it causes the patient to lose consciousness for 15 to 20 minutes.

Camphor Oil appears in Shock Therapy

Camphor oil is given by injection and causes a form of shock therapy. The patient experiences a sudden seizure, like epilepsy.

The Bathhouse appears in In the Bathhouse

The Bathhouse is normally a place to wash with soap and water and get clean. When the political prisoners use it, it becomes a form of torture.

The Cast-Iron Stove appears in Carpenters

The Cast-Iron stove is in the carpentry shop, and is a place to get very warm. That is why the freezing convicts want to go there.

Duskania appears in Dry Rations

Duskania is a mountain spring and a location where the camp administration wants a road built by a group of convicts.



The Prospecting Camp appears in Sententious

The prospecting camp in the story "Sententious" is for prisoners that are released but still in exile in Kolyma. The prisoners first work with topographers and a geologist to locate new deposits of gold and other minerals.

The Prosthetic Devices appears in Prosthetic Appliances

A group of prisoners that have prosthetic devices are arrested. These include a man with a bad back who has a steel corset, and others with an artificial arm, leg and eye. These items are confiscated.

The Vlasovites appears in Major Pugachov's Last Battle

The Vlasovites are followers of General Vlasov, a Russian General who is captured by the German Nazis during World War II and raises an army of Russians to help Germany.

The Sweater appears in On Tick

The Sweater is worn by a political prisoner. It is seized by a criminal prisoner so he can pay his gambling debt.

The Appendix, Appendicitis appears in A Piece of Meat

The political prisoner, Golubev, fakes an attack of appendicitis and has his appendix removed, to avoid being returned to the mines.

Jhankar appears in The Snake Charmer

Jhanker is a notoriously difficult mine to work in and survive.

The Novels appears in The Snake Charmer

Platonov agrees to recite novels from memory to amuse the criminal prisoners. He begins with "The Club of Black Jacks."



The Intravenous Injection appears in Chief of Political Control

The intravenous injection is needed by the Chief of Political Control because he has the habit of being injected with glucose. Only the convict orderly of the medical personnel present is able to give it.

The Child's Notebook appears in A Child's Drawings

A child's notebook is found by a prisoner searching through a pile of garbage. The notebook has drawings of the child's town in the Far North.

The Injector appears in The Injector

The Injector is a machine that melts the ice in and around rock, so that men in the mines can break the rock up into smaller pieces, in their digging for gold.

The Former Monastery appears in My First Tooth

The Former Monastery has been turned into a sort of prison way-station.

Khatynakh appears in The Lawyers' Plot

Khatynakh is the headquarters of the NKVD, the secret police, where the director Smertin (Death) has his office.

Serpentine appears in The Lawyers' Plot

Serpentine is a prison for prisoners who are about to be put on trial, and perhaps shot, for new crimes.

The Tractor appears in Lend-Lease

The Tractor is a gift to the Soviet Union from the United States under the Lend-Lease program. The tractor can move large tree trunks or, in the case of this story, dead bodies.

American Supplies appears in Lend-Lease

American Supplies include American wheat flour, glycerin, and machine grease. The supplies are delivered in huge American trucks, including large sacks of white wheat



flour. The flour is used to make tasteless but filling white bread. The glycerin is eaten as "American honey," while the machine grease is first mistaken for butter and also eaten, though it is needed for machines.

Condensed Milk appears in Condensed Milk

Condensed milk is one of the canned goods sold to criminals. It is sweet and nutritious.

Esperanto appears in Esperanto

Esperanto is an artificial language, intended to be a universal language. It is based on roots from Latin and Romance languages as well as other languages.

The Prospecting Group appears in Esperanto

The Prospecting group searches for new deposits of gold and other minerals to mine. It is a considerably easier job to work, than the jobs in the mines.

Irkutsk appears in The Train

Irkutsk is a large city in Western Siberia and a stop on the way to Moscow, the Soviet capital.

The Train Station appears in The Train

The train station in Irkutsk is patrolled by the military but still is dangerous because of criminal gangs.

The Train appears in The Train

The train looks like a crowded dormitory, with people sleeping, getting drunk, vomiting, and even a prostitute setting up her business in a little corner behind a curtain. The train is going to Moscow.

The Secret of Pharmacology appears in The Used-Book Dealer

The secret of pharmacology is how defendants in show trials are made to go along with the state orchestration of the trial. Drugs are used to break the defendant's will.



The Party Membership Card appears in The Used-Book Dealer

When Fleming is released, he fights to get back his party membership card. There is a meeting of the local Communist Party, and they restore his party membership, but with the comment that there was an "interruption of membership."

Themes

The Struggle for Survival

The men in the Kolyma camps, by and large, want to survive. Indeed, that is the only desire left in them. Many of the political prisoners have other issues. They are often former Communist party cadre, who did not keep up with the new trends of brutality of the dictatorship of Stalin. For most of the men, however, the struggle for survival is all they can think about anymore. They are exhausted working in the mines and their food supply is not adequate. In addition, the political prisoners must deal with the criminal element, that is given better conditions and more freedom. The likelihood of criminals surviving Kolyma is significantly higher since they can often get administrative jobs and get time to recuperate from the vicious cold work in the gold mines. Many of the political prisoners that do survive are the ones able to stay in hospitals. As shown in the story "Shock Therapy," this creates a huge incentive to fake physical conditions and diseases. In the story "A Piece of Meat," the reader sees the criminal element as well using hospitals as places to rest.

In the struggle to survive, all normal values are inverted. To be a criminal is better than to be a political "enemy of the people." The prisoners with an education are useless except to be worked to death in the gold mines. Peasants that have primitive skills in rural labor are more valuable to the administration at Kolyma than intellectuals. In the story "Carpenters," the carpenters can have warmth, while the graduates of prestigious schools are thrown back out into the cold, after a couple of days. The struggle to survive becomes easier during World War II due to American aid, as shown in the story "Lend Lease," but this aid is not always used properly. Modern tractors dig up the corpses from years past, reminding the narrator of the death machine that he is facing.

The Cruelty of the Soviet Regime

The Soviet regime sends millions to their death on ridiculous charges. In the story "Dry Rations," the reader finds out about a teenaged boy, Fedya, who is sent to the camps for killing his own sheep without authorization. In the story "In the Bathhouse," even the procedure of becoming clean and delousing is turned into a form of persecution against the political prisoners. In part, the camps at Kolyma resemble the German Nazi concentration camps in which people are worked to death, but in some ways they are different. In many cases in Kolyma, Russians are causing the suffering and killing their fellow Russians.

The political prisoners are special targets for daring to, in real or imagined ways, defy the Soviet regime. This targeting of political prisoners, as well as Soviet Communist doctrines in general, creates some odd circumstances. Prisoners can survive and get some health care in hospitals, since the administration itself pretends to be unclear that the majority of prisoners are to be worked to death in the gold mines. This deadly intent



comes out in the ironic story "Magic." A new administrator tries to motivate men to work better by giving them enough food. As soon as one prisoner, instead uses his extra strength to run from the guards and be shot, the new administrator is laughed at and ridiculed. He is told that only the extreme cold motivates the prisoners to break rock in the mines. Of course, it is the extreme cold plus the lack of food and adequate rest that kills prisoners. Jailers are forced to violate Soviet rules and give political prisoners skilled jobs, otherwise nothing gets done right. In the story "Chief of Political Control," the local chief visits a hospital. No one from the civilian staff there can even give an intravenous shot; only the convict orderly can do it. The criminal element is too busy looting the administration and other prisoners, so it cannot do useful work often. Those prisoners who are not worked to death often survive by becoming government informers.

Hope Under Brutal Conditions

Though most of the prisoners at Kolyma die there, some survive, like the author, Shalamov, who is a prisoner there for 17 years. There is also a population, at Magadan and other towns in Kolyma, who are no longer convicts and work in the area. One of the prisoners who has been released is described in the tale "Sententious." This tale, like so many others, may be at least in part, autobiographical. The narrator is slowly regaining his strength. He begins to be able to think again and remember his academic training and vocabulary. In the story "Lend-Lease," the conditions and food supply in the camps improve greatly due to American aid during World War II. Perhaps this aid relieves a food shortage in the Soviet Union, whether the food shortage was created by production problems or political decisions. Similarly, in the story "Condensed Milk," canned food appears at Kolyma that does not seem to have been there earlier, though it is still accessible only to privileged members of the prisoner population.

New prisoners are also sent to Kolyma during and after World War II. Russian soldiers that are returning prisoners of war from Germany are declared criminals and sent to the camp in many cases. In the story "Major Pugachov's Last Battle," a group of 12 men try to escape from Kolyma, though they know it is surrounded by mountains and seas. This is nearly impossible, but it is incredible that some prisoners have the hope to escape. Hope for Kolyma prisoners can mean anything from seizing an airplane and flying to Alaska, to getting two days of warmth in the brutal cold. This can create absurd and comical, though deadly, situations. In "The Lawyer's Plot," the narrator is very happy to have a few days on a trip, often getting good food, tobacco, and sleeping in a warm bed. Only later does he realize that he is accused of being in a plot, and is likely to be shot. Prisoners who are overworked in the mines can only think of survival one day at a time, so, paradoxically, being on death row can give a prisoner hope.



Style

Point of View

Many of the stories are told from the first person point of view of the narrator. The narrator may be describing an event that happens to him, or an event that occurs to another. In the story "Dry Rations," the narrator describes what happens from a first person point of view, but most of the action and changes occur to the other three men sent off into the woods to build a road. The narrator is mostly an observer, though he occasionally talks to and interacts with the other characters. In the story "The Bathhouse" the narrator describes the more general conditions of political convicts when they are forced to go to the bathhouse. This is a description of the general routine and why the political prisoners all hate bathhouse day, and what difficulties they suffer. Likewise, in the story "Lend-Lease," the general benefits of receiving American lend-lease are described, and also how these benefits are turned into evil things by the Soviet authorities. Lend-Lease tractors are used to better conceal the dead bodies produced by the camp conditions. Only towards the end does the narrator, from a first person point of view, describe his horror at seeing the still undecayed bodies from years ago. Other stories are told from a third person point of view. These generally center around one character. Major Pugachov in "Major Pugachov's Last Battle" organizes and leads the escape attempt, although there are also scenes where Major Pugachov is absent and other characters lead the action. In a simpler story like "Carpenters," the protagonist, Potashnikov, is described in the third person.

Setting

The setting is the Prison camps of the former Soviet Union. Most of the stories are about the prison camps in the remote Kolyma district, which is north of the Arctic circle and in the extreme north-east corner of Siberia. A few of the stories are about prison camps in Western Siberia on the way to Kolyma, or the train ride back to Moscow, or remembering Kolyma while sitting in Moscow. Kolyma is isolated by mountains and seas and is referred to as a sort of island, separated from the mainland, since it is so inaccessible. Escape is, practically speaking, impossible. The most deadly part of the Kolyma camps is working in the gold mines, where prisoners are quickly exhausted and frozen in the long winter. The temperature can go below minus 60 degrees Celsius, at times for weeks. This is described as cold enough to freeze spit in the air that is spat out by a man. Men and women are separated and political prisoners are caught between the brutality of the guards and administration, and the wanton violence and murderous acts of the criminal element. Criminals beat and kill political prisoners without being punished. Work quotas are impossible to achieve and prisoners try desperately to get out of the mines, into an administrative job or into the prison hospitals. The Soviet authorities try to maintain the fiction that they are developing mining areas and somehow rehabilitating prisoners. The authorities maintain hospitals and workshops in



Kolyma. Actually, most of the prisoners, especially political prisoners, are worked to death.

Language and Meaning

The stories of Shalamov are written originally in Russian and translated by John Glad. The descriptions in most stories seem to be autobiographical, although since this is fiction, liberties can be taken to make each story more interesting and to the point. The language is fairly simple and there is every reason to believe that the translation into English is effective. The stories are not edited by the author, due to his position as a Soviet dissident who had his stories smuggled out of the former Soviet Union. One challenge for the reader is to get acquainted with words describing the local Siberian conditions and the plant life of the area. These words include taiga, the tea drink, Chifir, dwarf cedar and permafrost, and describe conditions under short summers and long cold winters. Russian language terms are usually explained. What can be confusing are the terms and usages relating to the Soviet system itself. Heads of prison operations are referred to as "citizen chiefs." Unlike German Nazi camps, where distinctions are racial, at Kolyma, often Russians are killed by Russians. Odd terms of class warfare ideology reflect Soviet prejudice against elites, the rich, and educated people. In one of the more ironic twists, criminals are favored by the authorities and have more privileges. They lord over the political prisoners, who are convicted under the Soviet Constitution, Article 58, and are considered "enemies of the people."

Structure

The stories are divided into seven sections: Survival, Hope, Defiance, The Criminal World, The Jailer's World, the American Connection, and Release. The author makes a point to not let his stories become overwhelmed by the horror of their surroundings. Generally one or a string of related incidents are described. The situation is usually given by a narrator, and the desires of the main character or characters are described. Then the situation is played out to the end. For example, in the somewhat longer story, "Shock Therapy," Merzlakov sees that with his large size, he will soon be destroyed by the small rations and hard work of the mines. He figures out, by accident, a way to be sent to the hospital and survive. A doctor there realizes that Merzlakov is a fake, and then makes it his goal to force Merzlakov from the hospital. In a similar story "Quiet," a new administrator tries to give extra food to a weak gang, in order to make them work harder. It only serves to give a man the strength to deliberately run from a guard and be shot. In this structure, the brutality of camp life is allowed to emerge naturally as part of the story line. Without using a false sermonizing of the horror of camp life, the stories show how men live and die in the camps.



Quotes

He took from the ashes of the fire a large stone and shoved it into the sack. "They don't untie them there," he said frowning. "Now we've met our quota."

P. 25, "A Pushover Job," Convict to Narrator.

A scrawny intellectual lasted longer than some country giant, even when the latter had formerly been a manual laborer.

P. 29, "Shock Therapy."

Clean underwear is a pure lottery, and I felt a strange and terrible pity at seeing adult men crying over the injustice of receiving worn-out clean underwear in exchange for dirty good underwear.

P. 44, "In the Bathhouse."

His own case was so trivial (writing letters to his fiancée) that the only proof of agitation (Article 58, Point 10) consisted of their correspondence. His "organization" (Point 11 of the same article) consisted of two people.

P. 59, "Dry Rations."

"First you go to the club, And then off to play; Tie a tag to your toe, And jump in your grave."

P. 68, "Dry Rations," Savelev.

Sententious! I couldn't believe myself and was afraid when I went to sleep that I would forget the word that had newly returned to me. But the word didn't disappear.

P. 76, "Sententious."

"Next time you'll believe those of us who have experience. We shot one today. A loafer. Ate his government ration six months for nothing. Say it: 'loafer.'" "Loafer," repeated the educator.

P.88, "Quiet," Area Chief to Educator.

Sasha stretched out the dead man's arms, tore off his undershirt, and pulled the sweater over his head. The sweater was red, and the blood on it was hardly noticeable.

P. 112, "On Tick."

The surgeon looked into Golubev's eyes and said of his friend who had just departed to his death: "It's his own fault. All he needed was an attack of acute appendicitis and he could have stayed."

P. 115, "A Piece of Meat," Surgeon to Golubev.



"It's so boring my legs are getting longer," moaned Fedya. "If only someone could tell a novel."

P. 126, "The Snake Charmer," Fedya (the criminal).

Stukov, however, could learn about that sort of thing from Miller, Pavel Miller—an engineer, convicted of counter revolutionary activity. Miller was Stukov's favorite.

P. 141, "Magic."

I stepped out of line and said in a trembling voice: "How dare you beat that man!"

P. 147, "My First Tooth," The Narrator.

Together with the assistant of the officer-on-duty we went upstairs, and in the corridor of the second floor stopped in front of a door bearing a plaque: "Smertin" meant "death" in Russian, and so threatening a pseudonym (it couldn't have been his real name) impressed me in spite of my exhaustion.

P. 155, "The Lawyers' Plot."

"Captain Rebrov has been arrested. Everyone arrested under his instructions is being released."

P. 170, "The Lawyers' Plot."

Grinka Lebedev, parricide, was a good tractor driver, and he controlled the well-oiled foreign tractor with ease. Grinka Lebedev carefully carried out his job, scooping the corpses toward the grave with the gleaming bulldozer knife-shield, pushing them into the pit and returning to drag up more.

P. 180, "Lend-Lease."

"So you say the state is worse than the camp criminals?" Plutalov stared at me from under lowered brows, biting his lips and sitting uncomfortably on a stool behind his desk.

P. 193, "Esperanto," Camp Chief Plutalov to Narrator.

"A paramedic? A doc? You drank the blood of people like us. We have a few things to say to you."

P. 199, "The Train," Thief to Narrator.

"Why do you keep asking about the constitution? Your constitution is the Criminal Code!" And he was right.

P. 208, "The Used-Book Dealer," Guard to Narrator.

"It would have been too human to possess chemical will suppressants and not use them on the 'internal front.' This and only this is the secret of the trials of the thirties, the open trials... There were no 'doubles' in those trials. The secret of the trials was the secret of pharmacology."

P.210, "The Used-Book Dealer," Fleming.



Topics for Discussion

Brutality can be the steady demands of the authorities for work in the freezing cold. More subtly, brutality can be forcing prisoners to lie, cheat and inform on fellow prisoners to survive. Discuss different methods and degrees of brutality.

Discuss hope. Hope can be fanned by any improvement of a day, or a long-term improvement. Does hope spring up eternally for the prisoners of Kolyma?

Desperation can take many forms. In "Major Pugachov's Last Battle," Pugachov leads an escaping group that is willing to die trying, even if they only escape for an hour. Other prisoners desperately fake diseases and broken backs, in order to escape work. Discuss desperation.

Discuss hypocrisy and the Soviet system. The Kolyma camps under the Soviet system work prisoners to death. Yet, the Soviet authorities insist that they are stopping lazy people from being loafers. What is the purpose of maintaining this fantasy?

Discuss paranoia and social control. Even in the closed world of Kolyma, some prisoners are used as informers and those who provoke escapes. What purpose does this serve?

Discuss torture. General torture in the Kolyma camp consists of working under horrible conditions, but there are other more subtle forms of torture, such as what is described in the story "In The Bathhouse." What purpose do these more subtle forms of torture serve?

Discuss treachery. In Soviet society, one of the most dreaded types of persons is the informer for the secret police. What do such people who commit such treachery have to gain?

Discuss the criminal world. Men sentenced for ordinary crimes are also at the Kolyma camps and usually get better treatment than political prisoners. How does this serve the purposes of the Soviet authorities?

While the Soviet Union does have outside enemies in the 1930s, the country descends into an endless series of show trials and other trials. The reader sees how this affects inmates in stories such as "The Used-Book Dealer." Discuss the NKVD, the internal secret police.

The narrator in the story "Sententious" recovers from a condition near death after being released from the Kolyma camps. He gradually can experience new emotions and remember his old life. Discuss recovery from a near death experience.