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**CHRISTMAS IN THE GULAG**  
By Paul Lambrecht

The wind swirled around the cinderblock corners of the buildings, delicate and soft as hammer-strokes.

The inmates were grouchy and lousy.

Here it was another Christmas in this godforsaken dump of human brokenness and misery.

The sentries would not tolerate a celebration of the day. But the forced laborers mustered the shadow of a twinkle in their eyes, and a rigor mortis like spring in their step.

"Christmas, da," they said in whispers.

"Da, Christmas."

The sky was soot grey, their skin crawling with colonies of ticks, mites, and crustaceans.

The low cantankerous grumble of the mining equipment masked their joyful chirps of energy. They smiled warmly and deeply at one another's gaunt grim starving faces. A spirit of cloistered camaraderie swelled up from the coffin of permafrost beneath their feet.

"Comrade, dance. Dance a merry jig. Have a jolly Christmas," said Pilaf, winking an eye, or twitching it. Any voluntary motion was apocryphal in a forced labor camp.

Pilaf had filched a bottle of vodka from the officer's mess and guzzled the whole thing. The penalty for being found inebriated was flogging and quarter-rations for a whole month, but if the opportunity presented itself, it was worth it.

Pilaf revealed nothing of its effects, except for bloodshot eyes, and a slight stumble.

For a few hours, it was a blessed miracle to feel no pain.

"I seen the Mother Mary," he said. "She was so beautiful. Like a China doll. And she love me, too. She say Pilaf, have another drink. Finish off the bottle, so I did."

Yuri nodded. Fraternization like this was forbidden, so he tried to appear as if he was doing the work of two men.

"Pilaf, you'll be flogged for loafing," he warned.

Pilaf looked around shadily, unimpressed.

"Pish, I care not," he boasted.

"And I'll be flogged, too, you cur."

Pilaf picked up his shovel again and resumed his efforts on the other side of the ditch.

And he resumed his monologue, as well, a little breathy.

"And then I saw my Katka, like her face was in a cloud. Glowing. She said, Pilaf, I've resolved to marry you after all. Would you like another shtickle of borscht?"

"I said, yes my dear, and please, top off my glass of plum brandy. Ah," he sighed.

"It was a wonderful meal. And then we made love like American moviestars."

Yuri smiled. Pilaf had been a university professor, a Pushkin scholar.

He'd had a pretty girlfriend in St. Petersburg. She was in another gulag somewhere in Siberia, with her new paramour, a slightly more prominent subversive intelligentsia.

Yuri had a girl in Minsk, who drove a coach and smoked cigars. In a previous life, he'd had a job in the coke smelter at the ironworks.

Pilaf was one of the few who talked to others in the gulag. He was constantly being flogged and scourged. His wit would not permit bondage. He sought to drive a bargain with death. He would not fear it, and it would not find him.

He could make the sentries laugh. They were mostly cruel young boys from the very cruel first families of Moscow.

Healthy, boisterous, repugnant in every way. Pilaf they hectorred, chided, harangued, but tolerated. He waited their dinners in the officers' mess.

He helped them write letters to their girls back home, which he enjoyed, substituting their love objects with the pure arduous longing-filled thoughts for his Katka.

Yuri they kicked like a dog and spat at, because he was stronger than they were, more muscular yet somehow meek as a lamb. A gentle idiot they thought.

He memorized their faces, the smallest detail of their set of features, in case he were to run into one of them on the street one day.

He would atomize their eyeballs in their sockets. They sensed this on some level, and hoped to pre-empt the eventual moment of reckoning at his hands by heaping venom his way in the meantime.

They forced Yuri to empty the guards' chamber pots. They made him kiss their blistered frozen feet, launder and dry their long underwear, and called him their little *sluzka*.

They made him sleep in the closet with the mine canary. One sentry, the worst, who would one day have two pulverized eyes, required a separate chamber pot for each function, and they had to be fresh and antiseptic. He also seemed to enjoy an audience.

Even with his body exhausted from a triple shift in the mines, Yuri swung five hundred phantom punches in the

close confines of the closet, stirring up a calming somnolent breeze for the slumbering mine canary.

These final exertions collapsed the last remaining holdout of his stamina, and he yielded to a deep and troubled sleep.

In the morning they roused him with a spritzing of tepid water flung in his face. Thus began the day's indignities. For any chance of finding real nourishment on a given day the prisoners were left to their own scrounging devices.

A hare or squirrel, cooked in a nest of coals, was vastly superior to the slurry they were served, and which seemed to make a person actually feel weaker.

Then a full day's worth of labor and another light meal after sunset, gruel, or some species of local varmint one of the inmates could stun with a sling.

The barracks at night was a veritable Oriental bazaar of treasures and oddities. Squirrel-hide pate covers, stories from the outside world cobbled together from newspaper headlines, political pamphlets, pornographic daguerrotypes, religious trinkets, medicine, talcum powder, books, letters, booze, drugs, jokes, caricatures of party leaders: generally with outsized heads; swollen noses; and

genitals which might seem more at home proportionally on Hellenic statuary.

Also weapons. Yuri traded lyrical compositions about the soul and the powers of the human imagination under the strain of captivity for shivs, steak knives, a pistol, a nobuled club with a nail extruding from the business end, and a device he called the gouger, which had a crank on the end, and kind of looked like a cake mixer you wouldn't want to screw with.

He kept his armory on a board up in the rafters of the converted barn which served as a forge to repair mining equipment.

When he had spare time, he tested his implements on the rats which scurried across the floor towards the piles of seeds he laid out.

It was during these sadistic rituals where his best poetic lines emerged from awe-struck reveries, the fiendish shell of a man clattering around in the halls of pain and anguish.

"Comrade rat, nice day to have your tail burned off, isn't it?" he wheezed, shivering from the cold.

"It won't be hard to recognize you, little rodent, with your eyeball hanging out of the socket."

He left the tortured rat carcasses for the sentries to find. Each dead rat corresponded to one of them. But students of dark symbolism the sentries were not. They thought they had a psychopath in their midst, and they were determined to sniff him out.

The guards had a serviceable network of snitches among the prisoners. They knew Milos was an informant and that Andrei would squeal. But these two were not overly curious or knowledgeable about the goings on within the camp. Yuri sometimes suspected Pilaf of providing tidbits of intelligence for his various privileges, wondering if his principles weren't really a trumped-up guise.

The sentries suspected Yuri of mutilating the rats but couldn't prove it.

And then one day, the guard ended up dead.

Sergei was barely sixteen, straight from the orphanage, drafted into the infantry and awaiting his orders to report to training camp.

He was a sweet and simple boy and much liked among the guards. Pilaf and Yuri had befriended Sergei with their witty repartee and ribald tales of Resistance Fighters.

They pitied Sergei as a romantic youth who dreamed of one day fighting against what he'd just been conscripted to become. Sergei was conspicuously kinder than the rest in

his treatment of the prisoners, and more permissive (of smoking, talking, card playing)...

His body had been found strung up in the barn. The rats had descended the rope from the rafters and were gnawing the body like it was a big piece of jerky drying on a butcher's rack.

The guards' first response was to rain down a holocaust. They debated having a massive bonfire and crisping each prisoner alive until he fingered the murderer, and then perhaps coming up with an even more fantastically brutal mode of punishment for him.

They took their lead suspect, Yuri, into the granary basement and chained him to the wall. They flayed his chest muscles down to the bones of his ribcage. They cauliflowered his ears and bent back his fingernails but he admitted to nothing.

Then they decided to put the screws to old Pilaf, widely known to be Yuri's friend. Pilaf did not survive their depredations.

Yuri did not mourn his friend. He felt envy.

When the guards could see what happiness Pilaf's death brought Yuri, they returned him to work.

Their investigation had turned as cold as their hatred for the main suspect. Sergei had been clubbed to death

with a blunt object attached to a sharp gouging feature. That much was clear to the guards. They even managed to find a weapon which fit the profile amongst a cache of other nasty implements in the rafters of the very same barn where the body was found.

They found the gouger, the steak knives, some shivs. The guards now suspected they had an infiltrator from the Resistance in their midst, perhaps even a double agent.

Top brass from the Penal Bureau came to observe the facility. They added another perimeter of razor wire and beefed up security along the guard towers.

Then they left. The very next day, the mine canary was shot in its cage in the closet. This, more than Sergei's murder, sent icy shockwaves up the guards' collective spine.

They were dealing with an A-1 top-dog first-class loony toon here. A man for whom no life was too trivial to snuff out. An indiscriminate kill-happy slaughter-nut. They buried Budgie with full party honors in the churchyard of the Peoples' Chapel.

There wasn't a dry eye in sight as the singed mop of feathers was lowered into the ground in a cigar box.

Even Yuri wept at the loss of his old bunkmate.

Again they suspected Yuri of fratricide, avicide, but they couldn't muster the gumption to taunt him anymore. The air had been sucked out of their fun. They joylessly transferred him back to the barracks.

There he endured a brief hermit-like tenure, and then one day, he simply disappeared.

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The gulag closed for good in late 1978. No guard had remained on duty from the time of Yuri Alexi's confinement in the late '60s.

Those various tormentors of Yuri all met with various strange fates.

Yuri escaped the gulag on Christmas night, 1969, reeking of schnapps, firing his pistol, covered in greasy, matted hair, and a coat of stitched-together rodent pelts. Escape was generally considered suicidal due to the remoteness of the gulag's location in the vast wastes of

Siberia. The only way out was along the train tracks three hundred miles across the snow tundras, to the nearest town.

Yuri, bleeding from the leonine claws of the razor-wire fence, limped on, a mile parallel to the line of tracks. The guards did not chase him or report him missing.

They reasoned that with Yuri gone, the gulag would almost be a nice place to live. So they were able to put the troubling issue of his existence and disappearance out of their minds.

But Yuri did not go far. He cut back to the tracks when he realized no one was following him. He planted several sticks of dynamite in the stony icebound gravel underneath the rail ties, and joined them together with a long fuse.

As the biweekly supply train approached, Yuri lit the fuse and blew up a section of the tracks just as the train was passing over.

The explosion sent the train careening off the tracks, buckling in on itself in a splendid tumbling symphony of cast-iron destruction.

Yuri then cheerfully mixed among the black-faced and disoriented survivors, many of whom were soon-to-have-been forced laborers. Like soldiers, they outfitted themselves

with the warmest available clothing, filled packs with food and canteens, and set out back along the tracks in the direction they had come.

The next day an AWACS plane flew over them high in the ionosphere, and not long after that, a military troop train stocked with soldiers came chugging down the tracks.

The wolfpack of political prisoners hid themselves behind one of the snow banks piled up on either side of the tracks.

They saw the troop train again, a few hours later, coming back their way. It stopped at the sight of fresh footprints in the snow.

One brave soldier stepped off the platform of a passenger car to investigate the footprints. He was shot dead by Yuri as he stood, slumping into the snow, hot blood melting into a crimson reservoir beneath his body.

Then an explosion rocked the caboose of the train as another stick of dynamite detonated, causing a frenzied exodus of soldiers, some of whom were immediately cut down by Yuri's bullets.

Half the troops fled over the opposing snowbank and into the distance, and the rest charged their assailants. The ragtag bunch of refugees dispatched these few bold soldiers and now they took possession of the train.

Six hours later, they rolled into the Eskimo village of Yupika on the Sea of Okhotsk.

Yuri had a shave, chartered a boat to Japan, and flew back to Moscow to wait.

The rats would be coming home soon, and he'd be ready from his perch in the shadows, watching and waiting expectantly for them to take the bait.

**END.**