

Yana Yakovleva

(Spent 7 months in detention)

To try and single out some just one day from my seven month sojourn in SIZO No. 6 would be complicated. Every day out of the 7 months was not simple. Yearning for relatives, fear in the face of the unknown, the non-freedom, the clank of the deadbolts – all this created an internal sense of constant tension. One time I wondered why it was that my teeth hurt so much, in fact every single one of them? Then I realized that I had been clenching them so hard all the time that the muscles had begun to ache. I can recall individual episodes of how they brought me in, how the “doctor” examined me, how they assigned me to a cell at “assembly”, how they took me to something vaguely resembling a shower where I had to use laundry soap to wash myself with, and how they then gave out a mattress that was as old as I was judging by its appearance, but much thinner than me. The mattress – this is a whole separate form of torture in a SIZO. It is so thin, while the bars of the bed are made of wide, always cold metal. It is categorically prohibited to have two mattresses. And so the prisoners try to work things out as best they can. It’s a good thing that I subscribed to many newspapers. Vedomosti and Kommersant were hot items in our cell. You’d spread them out underneath the mattress, you’d lay clothing on top of that, and the result would be pretty decent. To this day I remember how my cellmate Tatiana, who later got 10 years for using cocaine, would lay out an advertising poster for some hunk under her mattress and say “Maybe I’ll dream about him”.

One episode immediately explained to me how you needed to live in these conditions. I’ve just arrived in the cell. I’m shocked by what I see. The cell is as long as a rail car and jam packed with women. There are women everywhere, wherever you look: sleeping, reading, sitting two together on the cots, there’s a not-large cafeteria. There’s a toilet and a shower,

the smell of cigarettes, the din of a television, nobody's taking any notice of me. There are windows, but there aren't any panes in them. They take them out in the summer. 46 women in one cell. 17 nationalities. I cry. The cell chief comes up. A girl some 35 years old. Looks a little like she could be Yakut. She asks, what are you crying for? I say nothing. She goes away, comes back with a photograph. Shows it. It's an old photo, black and white. Standing in front of some crookedly leaning wooden houses that have begun to sink into the ground with time is a little old lady, Yakut; next to her are two children some three and five years of age. A boy and a girl. Judging by the clothing and the squalor all around the photo is post-war. "These are my children," says she. "They don't have anybody now besides my grandmother. She's taken them in with her up North. I haven't heard a thing about them for a year already. And I've been here, in this cell, two years already. But I'm not crying. And you don't cry either." I didn't allow myself to cry in the cell any more. My story is nothing but a silly little trifle in comparison with hers. I'm distressed for myself, but her distress – and indeed that of many others here – is about their children. If I'd already had a child back then, how could I have forced myself not to think about it? Maybe this would have made me more vulnerable? But on the surface it seems that nobody is thinking about those who are left at home. Home is insanely far away, even if it is very close by. Everybody keeps her sorrow to herself. A strict principle applies in jail: here and now. Neither the past nor the future exists. Memories begone. Everything is fine with you. Everything will be fine and everything is going to end sooner or later. The unfairness, the overseers, the conditions that surround, you shouldn't let them get inside you: they're all on the outside – this is just a theater and you're just an actor playing a role, and this role is going to end some time.

.... Today there is a court hearing on extending my period of detention. I have no illusions, everybody goes through this agonizing trip to court, to the judge with the fish-eyes for whom what is going on doesn't have the slightest significance. She may be in the court, but she's

not really there. They didn't teach her to inquire and to understand. Or like this: they taught her to not inquire and to not understand.

...Reveille is at five in the morning. You'll need to bring along warm clothing, food you've prepared the previous evening, and once again newspapers. Not to read, but to lay underneath you on the icy bench in the *convoyka* [premises where arrestees are held while waiting for the start of a hearing in court—Trans.]. At 5:30 they lead you out into the corridor. You have to surrender your precious mattresses to the duty officer; it seems like he's the only one who thinks that you might not come right back after an extension hearing. They gather everybody together on the first floor in a cell, in the middle of which there's an open-type toilet, while along the sides are benches. By seven there are some 40 people gathered in the cell; everyone is smoking, and in half an hour there's no air left to breathe. I've prepared a towel, which I wet and hold up against my mouth. You sometimes get duty officers who divide the people up into smokers and non-smokers, but sometimes there are just so many people for departure that nobody bothers with such nonsense. By around 10 there's no air to breathe any more. I ask to be put into the beaker. This is an iron box some 60 centimeters [2 feet] wide. But at least you can breathe in it, and you can even stretch by crouching and pushing yourself out from from the bench. On the other hand, it's completely dark inside. The beaker opens. Maybe they're going to take me to court at last? But no, they bring my cellmate Regina in to me. This is a huge woman, whose breasts take up the entire beaker, and the only space left for me is on her lap. I try not to touch against her breasts and stand pressed against the door. Regina commands authority in the cell for her hasty disposition and long stint. I think she's been inside for three years already. She's being charged with fraud. They arrested her as she was passing a bribe to the provost of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations for getting some student admitted. She would usually pass the bribe with a dog - a Pekingese, which she always carried with her, and

if it was necessary to pass a bribe, she would give the provost the dog to pet, and on the dog was a special little pocket. This was her job, passing bribes for students. History is silent as to what happened with the provost. I sit two hours with Regina and she tells me about her life. All of her kinsfolk - brother, and husband too - are inside. What a happy little family! I listen and say nothing, after which Regina declares to me that I'm a smart person, you can see this right away because I'm always reading something. After this she actually calls me "professorship". I suppose she's in a better position to make the call than I am; that's her social circle after all.

Soon they lead Regina away, and an hour later they take me. Altogether I have spent around 5 hours in the beaker alone. What do they round us up here so early for?

There's a whole new set of rules inside the avtozak [prisoner transport vehicle—Trans.]. The main thing is to sit down closer to the bars and on no account to move when they seat other women next to you. Everybody starts smoking and once again there's no air to breathe, while the iron box of the avtozak heats up in the summer and freezes throughout in the winter. A huge quantity of people is stuffed into a tiny little partition; they sit on one another's laps. The delivery route to the various courts takes a long time. By around three o'clock they get me to the Zyuzinsky court. I'm a bit scared because I'm going to see my parents when they take me through the corridor to court. As I get out of the avtozak I can see my mother in the distance, on the other side of the fence. I shout: "Mom!" The cop boorishly cuts me off: "Enough with the yelling already!" They lead me into the convoyka; the cop looks right at me and for some reason says: "The pitcher goes often to the well..." I say nothing. They lock me up in the court's convoy premises ["convoy" is the term for prisoner transport security, e.g. prisoner transport guards are called "convoyers"—Trans.] And here is where you need the newspapers - to lay underneath you and to put on the jacket. It's dark; the strip of light coming in from under the door illuminates the "fur coat" on the walls. This is a kind

of concrete surface haphazardly splattered onto the walls; they do it so that you wouldn't write on them. A damp and gloomy space, in which I'm going to spend another 2-3 hours. Someone is coughing in a familiar voice on the other side of the wall. I shout: "Lyokha, is that you?" Yes, to this one my partner, whom I haven't seen for some 4-5 months. He is more informed than I am - they have a telephone in their cell, and at night he uses it to keep the business running and to plan important shipments through his son. I shout: "What's the news?" He tries to respond, but the overseer bangs on the doors with a stick: "Silence".

They lead us out to court one at a time. They take us up the stairs and lead us past my parents: I see my mother; she seems to be crying: "My daughter!" But my father doesn't have the time to say anything before they lead me into the courtroom. For some reason they're allowing REN TV into the courtroom; they do an interview and at the end they say: don't worry, we'll get you out of here. These words inspire hope. Any word of encouragement, it seems, has a special meaning, it leads to freedom. The "hearing" lasts five minutes, they've extended my detention by 2 months and it's right back to the convoyka. My parents managed to get a chicken passed on into the convoyka, probably for money. I ate it together with my convoy premises cellmate, bones and all. I haven't eaten chicken in a very long time. The food in the prison is impossible to eat, only the things that relatives buy in the store; if they don't buy anything, then there's nothing to eat. The recipe for prison balanda [a thin gruel—Trans.], it seems, has been passed on since the 1700s. They used to cook the same kind of swill for the katorga [penal servitude at hard labor in internal exile—Trans.] prisoners. In a word – balanda. Again we wait several hours for when they'll send us back. I want to get back "home" to the prison as soon as possible. The girls are waiting there, they know that the "courters" get back very tired and hungry. On the way back in the avtozak I see Alexei, partner, director, and now accomplice in crime. I push everyone aside so that I can sit closer to the bars – so we can converse. Alexei isn't looking good, he's ill and is

coughing all the time. He tells about the business; everything is functioning. And here I'd been sure that they'd thrashed everything. He tells me about the case; he cheers me up by saying that the scandal is growing and spreading and that deputies [members of parliament—Trans.] have gotten involved – in those times this was a resource. The press is writing about the “chemists’ affair”. My trip to court wasn't a waste of time after all - I've gotten some good news.

Along the way to Pechatniki, where the women's SIZO is, there is a transfer on Matroska. The time on the clock is 12 at night. This world is astounding from the inside. Old peeling walls, dating from the times of Dzerzhinsky [Founded and headed the first Soviet secret police 1917-1922—Trans.] if I'm not mistaken. The interior courtyard is lit up by the beams of the prowling searchlights catching the windows of the cells. Stretched between the windows are ropes – “horses”. Some kind of wrapped bundles move along them, above the heads of the cops. Hands stretch out from the windows, hundreds of hands, and people are shouting out cell numbers and things like “Coming your way!” and “Got it”. Nobody is paying any attention whatsoever to this. The prisoners are sorted and put into the right vehicles and we leave this hell. But this eerie scene on Matroska – in the center of Moscow, in the 21st century – remains etched in my mind forever.

I get “home” by one. Now if only they'd get me up to the cell faster. In the Next 2 months nothing is going to happen.