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On and Off the Trans-Siberian Train: The Bootmaker

Misha tells his story in Blagoveshchensk.

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Misha (Blago), 43 years old

I grew up in Blagoveshensk. I work as a shoemaker and sew mukluks: a type of traditional Buryat boots. I didn't have a mother: when I was two years old, they took away her parental rights. I don't remember her, I don't even have photos. She drank all the time and my father took me to live with him. She died when I was ten, from vodka.

My stepmother raised me. I learned that she wasn't my birth mom when I was 13 years old. I somehow suspected it and looked at the documents. Her name was Valentina and in my birth certificate it said my mother's name was Natalia. I brought it up to my stepmom and she admitted that I was right, she showed me the documents saying that my mom hadn't been

allowed to raise me. I wanted to find her but there wasn't any information about her. Probably there's a grave in the cemetery but I never went. I don't know why.

I had a normal life with my father and stepmother. It wasn't worse than anyone else's. Normal, average family. I was a bad student, it was really hard for me, especially chemistry, physics, geometry: all those x's and y's and equations. I was better at French, I liked that. Then I went to college for municipal construction but I didn't even stay until the end of semester.

My father was a shoemaker, so I also went off to learn to make these traditional Buryat boots. They paid you a stipend while you studied. Within half a year I learned everything that I needed. Afterwards, in 1993, at 17 years old, I was put in jail for the first time for four years.

I hadn't been working alone. My partner Slava was four years older than me. The first time we broke into an apartment we didn't even really want to take anything, we just wanted to walk around as though we owned it. We didn't even really steal anything special, just small things.

From outside of an apartment you can tell how people live. We selected apartments with pretty windows, or an expensive door, or which had air conditioners. You set your sights on an apartment – you go during the day, and put a bit of tape on the door or stick a match in the lock. In the evening you look again: if everything is where it was, then no one's home. If the tape has been unstuck or the match is on the floor, then someone is inside. Or you can look in the windows. Now that wouldn't work anymore, as soon as you get near the entrance, the cameras are already watching you.

When I was held in a temporary detention center for three days, I was just a kid. The adult men there immediately said "Well it's gonna be jail, it's gonna be tough, you should follow a strict set of rules." For a child, that's scary. Actually the first time I went to prison, they stuck me in the sweatbox. There two 45-year-old guys forcing confessions out of kids 15-17 years old. They force them to confess crimes they hadn't admitted to. For this they get a reward – their sentences are cut in half.

The first two days were okay, I didn't know they did that yet. And then they told me, "OK, go write your confession" and gave me a stack of blank sheets of A4 paper. Then one of them grabbed a metal mug and hit me with it – I started bleeding all over the floor. That saved me. I wrote down what I'd already told the cops. I thought he would kill me, you know? Within a day they transferred me to a normal cell. One older guy and about 20 underage guys. There it was okay, it wasn't as crazy and lawless as in the sweatbox.

In jail you live by the code. If you're a normal guy, you hang out with normal guys. If you're a sniffler *[Editor's note: here and further is the description of a known Russian caste system in Russian prisons]*, you hang out with others. A sniffler is like...people are constantly telling him bring this, give me that, go there, leave that alone, make tea. If no one pays attention to the sniffler – then he's just nobody, alone he has no life at all. He's not even able to say anythingspeak for himself. He can agree with someone or help someone...just sniffling, as we say. And once you start being like that, then that's it, this is how your life in jail will continue. You can't get out of that position, you can only fall lower.

Even lower – those are the hurt people. You know who they are? No? Well, it's the gays. And

the pedophiles. At some point in jail they start talking about something that happened once. Inside, people are strict about that kind of thing. If you've done something bad with a woman, even if you've just licked her somewhere, then that's it. If you, as a normal guy, even drink tea with him, just "splashed" as we call it, in the same cup, then you're associated with him. You also can't smoke after him, if you get cigarettes from him it has to be a closed, full pack.

I was a normal guy, as we say "mujik", I wasn't reliant on anyone. That was how most mujiks were. I didn't want to be one of the criminal chiefs. That's a shitload of work. I saw how they lived. Totally over the top, very showy.

In the early 90s, they fed us stinking herring and barley. The herring wasn't cleaned, it still had guts, it still had its head. In my second sentence it was already better. They started to make good borsch, they gave us one can of tinned salmon a day.

Every morning at six we'd wake up to music. Every day the same song: "What a hard day" by Minaev. *[Editor's note: Russian version of "You're in the army now."]* Then we did exercises for 15 minutes, always outside, in summer and in winter. Before breakfast, there'd be a check. Everyone comes out of their rooms and there's a roll call for half an hour. Then you sit down and wait for breakfast. Not everyone fits into the cafeteria so you're divided into groups. Then you wait until lunch, in hope of someone getting a package from a visitor. A lot of people got ephedrine. Those were pills from China. Sometimes people would even eat 10 pills in soup or in condensed milk. I never tried it, but the guys who did it, they were running around like crazy all night long, they were on a different level.

Of the guys I know who were in jail, half of them are already dead. Some overdosed, some are still in jail, some caught tuberculosis and died.

In the jail there was a library. In our free time we read or watched one of the two television channels. I read all of Chase's detective stories there.

I also did my first tattoo in jail when I was underage. Instead of tattoo ink, we burned and cut off the heel of a boot, then we ground it into a powder and mixed it with urine. And then you sit there all day long, poking and poking away the time with the needle. Tattoos like: "It's more likely that a lion will turn down meat than a woman will stop manipulating and lying." Or "The more I know about people, the more I like dogs." I used to have a tattoo of a crest saying "Hello thieves" but people looked at me weirdly in the bus, so I covered it with a bigger tattoo in Thailand. And other tattoo I had removed. I didn't know what it meant when they made the tattoo, but later it turned out that it was a crest and stripes meaning that you're fatherless. Then I thought, why the fuck would I be fatherless, my father is still alive. To remove the tatoo, you take the plastic barrel of a pen, pull out the ink ball, light it on fire and blow. The skin swells, your eyes are burning, and you get blisters. It's so humid in jail, the wound was rotting for a month. Maybe it was infected.

After I got out of my first sentence, after exactly a year, I was put back in again. Me and a partner broke into an apartment where a trader lived. He dealt in mink coats from China. Unpacking and taking away 20 fur coats wasn't easy, we didn't have a car so we went back 3 or 4 times to grab everything. When we left, the apartment was empty. My partner met a drug addict who was collecting cigarette butts to smoke and offered to buy him a cigarette. Then my criminal partner (he was an Asian Buryat, you can't mistake him for anyone else) and the

drug addict with a braid went to go buy cigarettes at a kiosk right by that apartment — with just a ton of cash. Of course the lady in the kiosk remembered them and later told the cops everything. Then it turned out that the apartment actually belonged to a cop, the trader was renting it from him. Then the cops got the entire town looking for us and found us very quickly.

During my second time in prison I also worked as a shoemaker. I sewed felt boots and mukluks for the policemen. In exchange, they brought me tea, cigarettes, meat. Ten packs of cigarettes, half of a kilogram of tea in exchange for a pair of warm mukluks. It was good for me and good for them. When I was in jail the first time, my parents came and visited every month to see me and bring me stuff. The second time I went to jail, I wrote them and said they didn't have to come. My dad came to see me just one time, he brought me the materials so I could work.

When I got out for the second time, I still had this urge to go back to apartments. I don't fucking know why, now it's not like that anymore. I broke down a door, took the electronics and the television and hid them by the garbage shoot to go back and look for cash. Then the door opened, the owner came home. I heard it and jumped off the balcony from the second floor. It was nighttime and I didn't even look to see what was down there. If there had been a stake or something, I don't know what would have happened. I fell and ran, kept running, I ran about 100 meters and my heels hurt so much. I fell down, I just couldn't any more. And I yelled for help. A lady called out from the balcony, "what's wrong, what happened." I said, "The cops hit me, they broke my feet. They threw me out of a car, I'm lying here." She came out and called for an ambulance. Later I learned that she'd recently lost her son, he'd also been beaten up. You see, that's why she came out.

In the hospital they put two casts on me. I lay there and waited, wondering if they would come for me or not. They didn't. And since then I've been clean. That was a last warning. Now I don't want to anymore, it's gone.

I was married for ten years. It was in the 2000s, after I was released, I immediately found myself a seventeen year old. We met at a market, I suggested we go have a shot of vodka – and that's how it all started. After that I bought her clothes, I got her all cleaned up, and then she didn't need me anymore. She started partying, cheating on me. Of course I also cheated on her, maybe twice. But she did it completely openly. Every Friday she drank with her friends, she'd just get dragged into something. Once I called her, and she couldn't talk at all. She was mooing like a cow and she couldn't get out a single word, she was in a car somewhere. Then I heard two guys talking. I asked where she was, said I would go get her, but she couldn't answer me. I put up with it for a while but then it was just too much. Maybe it didn't work out with us because of children. She had an ectopic pregnancy and then they had to remove her Fallopian tubes. I hope the child was mine, but I can't be sure.

In 2013 we officially divorced, but after leaving the registry office we went to a pub and ended up in a hotel room. She got married but she still comes to me and cheats with me on her husband. That's better than if she was married to me and cheating with someone else. At least she's with someone else, coming to me. She knows that if she came back to me I wouldn't put up with her running around like she did before. When she comes over, her husband knows that she's with me. He doesn't call me himself but his friends do. They're mad, of course. But I

don’t give a damn, I’m having fun. I don’t force her to come, she comes herself.

If she wanted to come back to me, I would take her, of course. She actually said “buy an apartment and I’ll come back to you.” I bought a studio apartment and she said she had to think about it. Right now I don’t have anything. I even sold my car when they took away my driving license. And her man has a car, a two-room apartment, guns. So she decided to stay with him.

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