

Ginger Cats

Ginger cats are characterized by great courage and determination, and also, unfortunately, by their tendency to steal food. More than most other breeds of cats, they possess the ability to survive in a harsh environment. They don't meow : they roar, and it sounds like someone is tearing cardboard. They are extremely careful as to whom they should trust. Then, having made their choice, they become very affectionate and purr loudly. Recent DNA research tells us that they are the result of a mutation that took place in Scandinavia thousands of years ago ; so, may be, instead of calling them *ginger cats* we should say *Viking cats*. The one I have right now is called Berty.

Eugenie, my granddaughter, is nine years' old : probably the happiest time of childhood. She lives in a sexless world. To her, boys are only an irritating subspecies of the human race. When she sees two persons kiss on the lips, she goes "yuck !" She is still very much a child. She runs, she laughs, she swims like a fish and almost gives us a heart attack when she thinks we can't see her and decides to climb up a cliff.

"Grandad, why have you got a ginger cat ?"

“I’ve always had ginger cats.”

“I know. Mom told me. So, why have you always had ginger cats ?”

“It’s a family secret.”

“Tell me !”

“It would no longer be a secret if I told you.”

“That’s not nice ! You are horrible !” She walks away with an exaggerated sulking look on her face. She turns round and notices my smirk. She bursts out laughing : “But you will tell me, one day, won’t you ?”

“I promise.”

This conversation, or one close to it, takes place every six months, roughly. It has become like a ritual between us.

Six months have gone since the last time we talked about ginger cats. Eugenie will probably never have a chance to ask the same question again. I just learned that I am afflicted with acute lymphoblastic leukemia. It prompted me

to leave Eugenie a sort of spiritual testament... not just for her : for the whole family. However, before she reads it, I would like her to wait until she turns eighteen. The family solicitor will give it to her when the time comes. And so, like a virtual time traveler, I am now projecting myself into her future.

My dear Eugenie,

Happy birthday ! You are eighteen years' old : a big girl, now ; an adult, in fact. During your childhood, you have known the happiness that comes with living in a family that loves you, and whom you love. I hope your teenage years have also been serene, and that tragic happenings did not force you to grow up too fast.

When I met your grandmother, I was officially an orphan, and also officially a refugee. The year was 1947. I was eight years' old and had lost my voice, which meant that for most people I was medically dumb. I didn't know English anyway. I could read and write, but only in Cyrillic characters. I could not communicate.

I had been sent to a foster home in Southend-on-Sea. The husband, a former bomber pilot in the RAF, had set up a small kenneling business. He

also bred prize-winning collies and long-hair dachshunds. His wife was a hospital nurse. They had a little girl, Amandine, who was two at the time. She is the one I married, later on.

Children have the knack of accepting the world as it is, or rather as they find it. Amandine accepted me as I was : shy, shattered and speechless. It was thanks to her that I slowly floated back to the surface, started to speak again and learned English.

And so, little by little, I did turn into a normal boy, even if it's hard to define the term "normal". I may have been normal, but I also remained uncommunicative, solitary and incomplete for a long time. I had fallen prey to an irrational terror : that of being sent back to Murmansk.

When I started school, I could have chosen Russian as a foreign language. I would have got straight "A"s... but my paranoia took over. It was made worse by the fact that some of my teachers were hysterically left-wing.

I was born at number 613 Proezd Svyazi in Murmansk. My mother was a housewife, and my father a university professor of French literature. It turned out to be his downfall. One of his

students felt that his lectures and his choice of titles for the reading list did not quite follow the communist party lines. He mentioned it to the Dean, who mentioned it to the MGB. (They had taken over from the NKVD and eventually became the KGB).

It didn't take much to end up in the gulag. At any time, you could be accused of being an enemy of the people. It could follow an argument at the factory or at the office. Rare Western visitors would often comment on how quiet, how silent, in fact, crowds could be in town squares and busy streets. People were afraid of saying anything. Having a pretty wife was not safe. Indeed, being a pretty woman was even less safe. If she refused sexual advances from a bureaucrat, policeman or dignitary of some kind, her husband, brother or father could end up working on a railway or a pipeline in Siberia. Contrary to a widespread Western notion, Russia and her occupied European territories were never ruled by the dictatorship of the proletariat. They were, however, ruled by the dictatorship of bureaucracy and its terrifying thought-control police.

The door to our small apartment flew open at 04:00h. Howling with fright, my mother and my

two sisters were dragged out of bed, handcuffed and roughly taken away. I never saw them again. Oddly enough, my father and I were not handcuffed. It may have been because we didn't yell. Who knows ?

The henchmen left the door to our apartment wide open and at the mercy of neighbors who certainly rushed in to steal what they could. It was the rule in such circumstances.

Half a dozen soldiers were waiting for us on the sidewalk. The date ? February 15, 1947. The outside temperature was -15°. How could I forget ? Fifteen below freezing on February 15 ! It's the sort of coincidence that sticks in your mind.

We started on foot towards the harbor. One of the soldiers started talking to my father : "Don't worry about your kid. They never keep children for long. He'll be sent to a foster home." That's the paradox of the Russian soul. At the least expected moment, the bully turns into a nice guy, and the poet becomes a psychopath. My father got the message. Springing into action, he pushed two of the guards away from him and dived into the dark waters of the harbor.

I know what you are going to ask, Eugenie : “Why wasn’t the water frozen solid ?” Well that’s one of geography’s oddities. At the very end of its circuit, the Gulf Stream reaches the shores of Murmansk. We are looking at its last hurrah, its last eddy, with the result that the port remains open to navigation all year round, even in the heart of Winter. Our guards were so surprised that they hesitated for several seconds. One of them, finally, opened fire with his submachinegun. He probably did not hit anything, because he said : “Your father won’t go very far. The water is too cold.”

I fainted.

When I came to, I was in a ‘normal’ gulag. Other establishments had been set up with whatever facility happened to be available : disused freight trains, for instance, where fifty or so enemies of the people were crammed in each carriage with a bucket to be used as toilet. The same bucket would bring in the “food” once a day.

In England, through odd conversations and meetings here and there, I made the acquaintance of a woman who was quite charming on the surface, but very left-wing and very “intense” (polite term for “hysterical”)

underneath. She claimed that the gulag was “only” the Lubianka prison ; which, in the realm of horrors would already have been quite impressive. During her years as a university student, she had passed out communist tracts in London outside subway stations. She would not admit that the gulag was, as described by Solzhenitsyn, an archipelago of some 423 centers of detention and torture, as identified in 1990 ; that’s without counting dozens of ‘psychiatric’ hospitals.

‘My’ gulag looked very much like a Nazi concentration camp, Birkenau, for instance, something of which I was only made aware much later. I found myself between rows and rows of bunkbeds... not real beds, of course : just wooden platforms.

When I was dragged in, none too gently, the smell choked me like a lethal gas. I couldn’t catch my breath. My attempts at breathing was painful, and I thought for a minute that I might pass out again : urine, diarrhea, sweat, bodies never washed and clothes never changed... I was finding myself among men who looked very old, with mad looks in their eyes, and long sticky hair and beards. Later, I realized that most of

them must have been between the ages of eighteen and forty.

“What’s your name ?” I was quite willing to answer, but not a word came out. Instead of Rezan Pchenitchnikov, all that I could achieve was a sort of husky croak. I simultaneously placed my hands against my throat, miming that I had lost my voice. From that moment, the other prisoners just called me Niemiets, meaning “the mute”.

I was shown to my bed, or rather my wooden board, already taken by an older boy, so thin that I could see the structure of his skull on his face and enormous black, hollow spheres under his eyes. He didn’t say anything. May be he too had lost his voice. There wasn’t enough room for two persons to lie down side by side, not even two children. We were laid out top to tail, our legs intertwined. In different circumstances I would have objected to the smell of his feet, but I had been propelled beyond the borders of fear and cruelty. That kind of detail remained just that : a detail.

The bunkhouse was gloomily lit by a few 40W bulbs. Here and there, narrow, horizontal windows looked out on... I don’t know. The glass

panes were caked with layers of ice with their cheerful motifs of rainbows and palm trees. Even without the ice, we couldn't have seen much at all. In February, Murmansk gets only four hours of sunshine a day. Clouds must have come back. I estimated the temperature at minus two. For Murmansk residents, it's almost a signal to go and fetch their bikinis.

Night and day having lost their meanings, I lay down entangled in my bedmate's legs. The prisoner who had greeted me explained that children were always placed on the upper level, and not just because they can climb better : all inmates, he said, suffered from uncontrollable diarrhea, and it trickles down from bunk to bunk. They did not want children to be subjected to that. He added : "Sometimes, there is bread at mealtime. It's hard and moldy, but it's the only thing that will not give you dysentery. Avoid everything else for as long as you can. Be patient. Kids don't usually stay very long. I would have liked to ask : "And where do they go ?"

I was less than a meter under a roof made of disjointed, black paneling. Right above my head, one of the boards had gone completely, revealing a long, grey rectangle of clouds, faintly tinged

with the yellowish lights of the city. I placed the time at around 4 p.m. I was hungry, having missed the only meal of the day : boiled carrots, apparently.

Stench, cold, hunger, the harshness of the wooden bunk with nothing to rest my head on were in themselves a form of torture... but the worst was the permanent grunting, moaning and yelling of my fellow prisoners. I was petrified. A bearded head appeared next to mine. "You all right, kid ? My name is Sebastian." At that moment came a spine-chilling howl from one of the bunks. I shivered. Sebastian noticed : "Don't worry Niemets, you will not be tortured. They only 'process' children to get parents to confess to such nonsense as conspiracy to assassinate Stalin, which, by the way, I wouldn't mind doing myself, given half a chance. Your parents are not here : you'll be fine."

Was that the reason my father had committed suicide in the port ? Did he know about all this ?

During the next few days, I learned about my gulag's specialty : a low-tech torture based on the simplicity of some shipbuilding bolts. Prisoners were stripped from the waist down, then forced to sit on a bolt. It was roughly ten

centimeters long and two centimeters wide. The thread would tear through anus and rectum. Afterwards, the slightest movement of the body would reactivate the pain. Naturally, the experienced tormentors had a great time making sure that their victims squirmed : punches on the face or the ribs, cigarette burns on the penis or the sole of the feet... The prisoner would end up torturing himself. At the end of a session, removing the bolt was as painful as inserting it.

His trousers soaked with blood, the accused would then be frog-marched back to the bunkhouse : another form of torture. Left to himself, he would not have been able to put one foot in front of the other any faster than if he'd been ninety years' old and arthritic. At night, if he moved on his bunk, even slightly, the pain would make him yell again. That's how I learned about those scary howls that I could hear at night.

If a man who had spent time on the bolt was told, one or two days later, that he was to go back for more, he would often lose his mind and be reduced to the state of a slobbering child. He was then ready to admit to anything at all. Torquemada would have loved it. The most popular confessions were : enemy of the people, saboteur of the glorious October revolution,

capitalist spy, and of course, fascist. As an insult, it's still fashionable in the West by those who don't know any better.

Of my first day in the bunkhouse, I can mostly remember one form of personal suffering : the cold ; each second as long as a minute, each minute as long as an hour.

In the middle of the night, a shadow appeared in the grey rectangle of sky just above my head. Thinking back on it, I'm glad I couldn't yell. The shadow became a sort of fat snake which stopped, hesitated, crept forward and turned into an enormous ginger cat who curled up on my chest. His purring created such a contrast with the shouts of pain, that it reminded me of real life outside the prison ; life among normal people.

No one had a watch, of course. They had all been taken away (polite way for stolen), but when you live north of the Arctic Circle, you acquire a sixth sense for telling the time. When I guessed that it must be around 5 a.m., the cat got up, stretched and disappeared through the rectangle of sky. As for my bedmate, he had died during the night. It left me absolutely cold (no pun intended).

There are circumstances that speed up the successive stages of one's life. In less than 48 hours, I had gone from childhood to adulthood. Adolescence remained an abstract concept, a luxury for westerners. I decided not to mention the cat to anyone. Hungry as the men were in the bunkhouse, some would have killed it and eaten it raw. I had already had the opportunity to observe the fate of a sparrow who may have been seeking shelter. An athletic giant with tattoos around his neck had caught the bird and eaten it in one go, head, feathers, guts and legs. As for the boy who had died during the night, it didn't take me long to strip him of his clothes and put them over mine. Everyone thought that it was the normal thing to do. On that day, we were served boiled fish, clearly in an advanced state of putrefaction.

The cat came back to me every night. In my mind, I called him Masla (butter in Russian). Along with the protection of my extra clothing, Masla saved my life. Thanks to his warmth, I didn't catch the sort of bronchopneumonia that must have killed the other boy. You can understand now why I've always had ginger cats. It's like a silent 'thank you' to the mysterious forces of the universe.

On the seventh day, they came to fetch me. The guard explained that I would be taken to an orphanage where I would be taught how to become a true servant of the revolution. Sabastian held me tight against his chest and whispered : “Above all, don’t let out that you are mute ; at least, keep it a secret as long as you can”. But he didn’t tell me why...

Another guard drove me to the railway station in a brand new car : a Pobieda. I had never been in such a comfortable vehicle. My parents didn’t have a car. Nor did most people : only communist party officials were allowed to own one. “Go to the waiting room” the man told me. “There’s another kid in there. Tomorrow, someone will put you both on the train to Moscow.”

The railway station was deserted. Ticket windows were closed. The waiting-room was terribly draughty. It didn’t have a door : only an archway leading to the platforms. An icy wind blew through broken window panes, making them moan like ghosts. The place stank of urine and wet cardboard.

Curled up in a corner on a red leather bench, a boy my own age was eyeing me with hostility and suspicion. The soldier went back to his car, and

took off. I crept on hesitatingly towards the only human presence in this echoing building. We looked at each other like two wild cats who don't know if they are going to fight or get along. After a few awkward seconds, the boy stretched out his hand : "Jody Metcheriakov. My parents are dead. You and I are being sent to a military academy in Moscow, but the train won't be here for hours."

As in a party game of 'give us a clue', I explained that I couldn't talk. He looked at me with something like pity (I think) : "My God, you'll have it rough !You'll be bullied by everyone in the barracks !"

Then and there, I decided not to go to Moscow if I could help it. Jody turned over and pretended to go to sleep. I came out onto the train platform. It was getting warmer, I mean less cold. I walked to the end of the paved area, then down among the network of rails. I passed a signal box. On the graveled ground, I spotted a peaked cap, a very pretty thing : dark blue, with a golden and green badge at the front. I put it on, and was glad of the protection it gave my head against the cold.

The station must have been close to a shunting yard. I could hear the screeching rattle of

carriages being pushed or pulled back and forth. The air smelt of coal dust, sea salt and clean steel from shiny rails : an altogether far more pleasant atmosphere than that of the bunkhouse.

A rumble and a somewhat unsettling sight : half a dozen freight car slowly rolling over all by themselves. They must have been pushed. And indeed, I could hear the coughing and sighing of an approaching steam engine. When the carriages stopped, their sliding doors wide open, I took a look inside : straw, a thick layer of straw. I made sure it was fresh, and not full of something like horse shit. I climbed in the carriage, and snuggled up under the straw. It felt like heaven. Where was that train going ? I didn't care. I just wanted to avoid the military academy.

I was just about to fall asleep when I heard a deep mutter of male voices and the crunching of boots over gravel. All of a sudden, a dozen soldiers climbed in the carriage, bringing with them a smell of clean uniforms, soap and shaving cream. I sat up. Amazed, they looked at me. My peaked cap may have saved my life. "You are too little to work for the railways !" I looked at the young man – almost a teenager –

who seemed to be in charge, mimicked that I couldn't talk. I pointed at the pencil stuck in his breast pocket. He handed it to me, along with a notebook. I wrote : "Labor shortage." There was a burst of laughter, and from then on they were all just fine.

The men sat on the straw, on either side of the carriage. One of them pulled out a long cardboard cigarette with only two centimeters of tobacco at the end. The soldier I now called 'sergeant' sprang up : "Stop it ! Are you crazy ? Smoking in the straw ?" Then, turning to me as if I had been the referee of the situation, he added : "Those idiot townies ! Apart from him, we are all country boys, you know. That's why they picked us. We are going to fetch some cows in Sweden. The train stops at the border. We all get off. The engine pushes the carriages across. The Swedes load up the cattle, and send the train back. Then it's off to Murmansk again."

It was a pleasant trip. We were chugging along at no more than 50Km/h. The soldiers had been given tin boxes with blinis and gherkins. They shared with me. Not a great meal, but compared to gulag food, it felt like a royal feast.

Every four hours or so, the train would stop for about twenty minutes. We would all tumble out for a pee or a number two. We would run back laughing. The carriage was not heated, of course, but at least it was protected from the wind. Humour compensated the frigid conditions : “Is yours completely shriveled by now ?”

Guards just waved us through into Finland where the train picked up speed. The rail network was in better condition.

Running away during a pee-stop had crossed my mind, but even at my very young age I knew that Finland was under the ‘protection’ of the USSR, and that was enough to put me off the idea. Besides, I didn’t fancy landing in the middle of a snow-covered pine forest.

As scheduled, the train stopped at the Swedish border. “Go on lads, hop out ! You see those barracks over there ? They’ve got sandwiches and bowls of soup waiting for us.”

I got off with the others, but sneaked out along the train, got back into another carriage and hid under the straw. Half an hour later, I was in Sweden. I rushed to the first man I saw in some sort of uniform. He quickly understood the situation, and ‘phoned what must have been the

social services. I could only express myself in writing and Cyrillic characters, and so, when a couple of days later, I was asked where I wanted to go, I wrote down : "England". By then, I had been vigorously scrubbed by a nurse, given clean clothes, and allowed to sleep in a real bed.

You see, Eugenie, I have never told this to anyone. So here we are, still in Southend-on-Sea where I was sent when I arrived. I adopted the name of my foster parents. They were very straight (rather than strict) people, but also very loving and reliable. I became Stewart Bishop. That's why you are called Eugenie Bishop.

At this point, I wonder if and how I should go on. I'm not ashamed, or anything like that ; it's only that what I have to say is so improbable, so outlandish that I'm not sure it can be believed. Anyway, I won't get another chance, and so here we go.

Adventures of Gerasim Pchenitchnikov, my father, your great-grandfather :

He may have been an academic, a professor of French literature, but he was also an athlete. He worked out for thirty minutes every morning and, on his way back from work, stopped at the

municipal swimming pool. He also belonged to a club of mildly insane swimmers who dived in the icy waters of the Barents Sea every January 6 to celebrate Epiphany.

When he jumped in the cold and dirty waters of Murmansk harbor, he honestly thought that he was committing suicide. He wanted to give me a chance to survive. Yes, he knew that his son would probably be sent to an orphanage where he would be brainwashed into becoming a member of something like the MGB, but at least he'd be alive, with always the possibility of thinking things over at some point... You never know.

Gerasim swam slowly and powerfully. He saw death as a gate to freedom. When he was far enough from the guards, he got rid of his jacket and trousers. We had, oddly enough, been given time to get dressed. With the exception of his hands, shoulders and the top of his head, his body was getting used to the cold. He persisted. He had decided that he would die fighting, even if it meant fighting the sea : a very abstract and silly fight indeed.

He couldn't see anything, but when long waves started to move him up and down, he knew that

he had left the confines of the port. He was then overcome by a kind of madness, and started to laugh. He had already been swimming much longer than, medically speaking, anyone is supposed to do without passing out. Still, he realized that he had more and more trouble moving his limbs. He wasn't so much tired as falling asleep.

Suddenly, he hit a vertical metallic plate. The shock immediately revived the pain everywhere on his body, and he knew that he would have only a few seconds before he sank. Right then however, powerful arms lifted him up by the armpits. Gerasim had collided with a French submarine.

By the time I turned sixteen, and even long before that, I had totally stopped being Rezan Pchenitchnikov. I was now Stewart Bishop. I vividly remembered the boy I had been and what that boy had suffered, all in the clearest details, but I never talked about it. I didn't want to burst into tears at the mention of my mother, my two sisters and my father. I didn't want to relive the treatment selected for political prisoners in the gulag. I then understood the attitude of soldiers who refuse to talk about what they have seen or done during a war.

At Southend Grammar School for Boys, I chose French as a foreign language : a silent nod towards my father's teaching at Murmansk State Pedagogical University. Our modest apartment had been crammed to the ceiling with French books. Still, I didn't want to forget Russian. I used to imagine entire conversations in my head. Alone in my room, I would translate a paragraph from novels such as 'Cider with Rosie' or 'White Fangs'. I would then shred the results of my efforts, so as to keep my past to myself.

I felt very much a part of the Bishops family. Also, I am glad that they never adopted me. If they had, I would have never been able to marry Amandine. Legally, we would have been considered brother and sister.

Should I elaborate ? Yes, of course, you are old enough now. When Amandine turned thirteen, which meant that I was nineteen, our relationship became more intimate. No need to get into details. Let's just say that we both knew how babies were started, and we made sure we never took that risk. Technically speaking, your grandmother was still a virgin by the time we got married.

At school, if I may say so myself, I was truly brilliant at French, and so, for my sixteenth birthday, the Bishops treated me to a linguistic stay in France, more specifically in Saint-Nazaire. It was very much like landing in another foster family. The father worked as baker in an infernal basement, away from the delicious elegance of the shop ; up at 4 a.m. every day, never free before eleven. On special occasions, when they had an afternoon batch, Mr. Gaudel, as he was called, only got two or three hours' sleep. His wife ran the shop.

The Gaudels had a daughter, Marie-France, one year older than me. An avid reader, she showed me how to get to the municipal library which stood at the end of a well-kept and beautifully landscaped park, and where I was pleasantly surprised to find a whole section of books in Russian. Marie-France explained that there was still a small, but steady stream of Russian metal workers and engineers who managed to escape to the West, and were now working in the shipbuilding yards. She had a library card, of course, and quite willing to borrow books for me. I was delighted, even if, as I started to read, I realized how much I had lost. Marie-France borrowed a Russian-French dictionary.

In the park, I had my favorite bench, 'my' bench. Amazing to what extent habits create habits. I regularly met the same people, and we would exchange a light hand or head signal of recognition. On the first day, a big scruffy dog huffed over towards me and, eyes full of hope, dropped a tennis ball at my feet. I threw it for him. Then, every time we met, we would play for a few minutes, until his master whistled.

One week later, under cool, beautiful blue skies, I headed for my seat, and was annoyed to see that it was occupied. Legs wide open, arms stretched out on the back, a tall, lean man with white hair and gaunt features, had spread himself out.

Normally, I would not remain stuck in front of someone without saying a word, but there was something about this man that I found both disturbing and attractive. He kept looking at me as if his eyes were fighting the onset of cataract. He finally mumbled in Russian : "What do you want ?" ; then added quickly in French : "Sorry : I'd forgotten where I was."

I switched to Russian : "You are not French, are you ?" He closed his arms and legs, leant forward a little and slurred slowly and

painfully : “But... but how old are you ?” I didn’t answer. Silence between us was getting really uncomfortable. As in a dream, I was aware of the distant rumble of traffic in town, the screeching of seagulls that reminded me of Murmansk, the angry croaking of a raven at the top of a tree, and even the panting of the dog next to me. In my mind, I was trying to put flesh and muscles on this skeleton of a man. I asked : “What’s your name ?”

“Gerasim Pchenitchnikov.”

“Dad ?”

“Son ?”

We were both paralyzed. I had trouble breathing. Slowly, unsteadily, he got up. I took him in my arms. He felt as light as if he were made of paper. He squeezed me against him. No tears ; we didn’t have any left, I suppose. “Let’s go and have a drink somewhere.” I suggested.

We found a café where he ordered a beer, and I a glass of port. I would have been too young to go to a pub in England (they were closed mid-afternoons anyway) but here, in France, I felt accepted as a fully-fledged human being, and it was a lovely feeling. That’s when my father recounted what had happened to him. That’s also when he revealed that he was dying of a

particularly swift and vicious form of leukemia, exactly the kind that's affecting me now.

And dying he was indeed. He insisted on going back to the park and to the same bench. There, he sat down, propped his head on the back of the seat, gave me a smile and, mouth wide open, he died : too many emotions had racked a very weak body. I stayed with him for as long as I could, then closed his eyelids, got up and left.

Rezan Pchenitchnikov, or Stewart Bishop, told Eugenie that he didn't have much more than a couple of months to live, and that the family solicitor would give her an A4 envelope when she turned eighteen. She would know then why he always had ginger cats.

They were sitting at the end of Southend pier when Stewart started his confession. "You will take good care of my cat, won't you ?" People walking by would turn round and gaze for a few seconds at this very young lady whose body, clinging to that of an old man, was shaken with silent sobbing.

