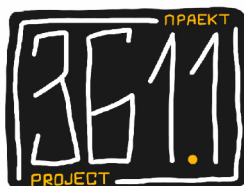




PROJECT 361.1

# A POLITICAL PRISONER'S SURVIVAL GUIDE



This book was created for you  
by the volunteer team of projekt 361.1.

The illustrations and texts are based on  
real materials shared with us by  
political prisoners.

First edition, 2025

📷 @project361.1



This book shares the true story of survival inside the notorious VALADARSKAIA detention center. Our heroes – like many of us – remain anonymous. But this story could have happened to any Belarusian, and sadly, it already has for many.

All the texts, including what you will read here, were handwritten – just like the many letters written by prisoners, their families, volunteers, and caring strangers.

Most of these letters were lost in jail, never reaching their intended recipients, and often never even making it past censorship.

By sharing these handwritten texts, we want to honor those who wrote them and those who will now try to read handwriting they may have never seen before.



We invite you on a journey into  
a real castle – one that holds prisoners.  
But please remember:

This is not a fairy tale.

There are no wizards here.



What  
you're about to read  
might

STRESS YOU OUT,  
SHOCK YOU

OR MAKE YOU  
BURST OUT  
LAUGHING—

sometimes all at once.

But don't worry -

Whatever you feel is  
completely **NORMAL**

The next 74 pages will take you inside  
life behind bars.

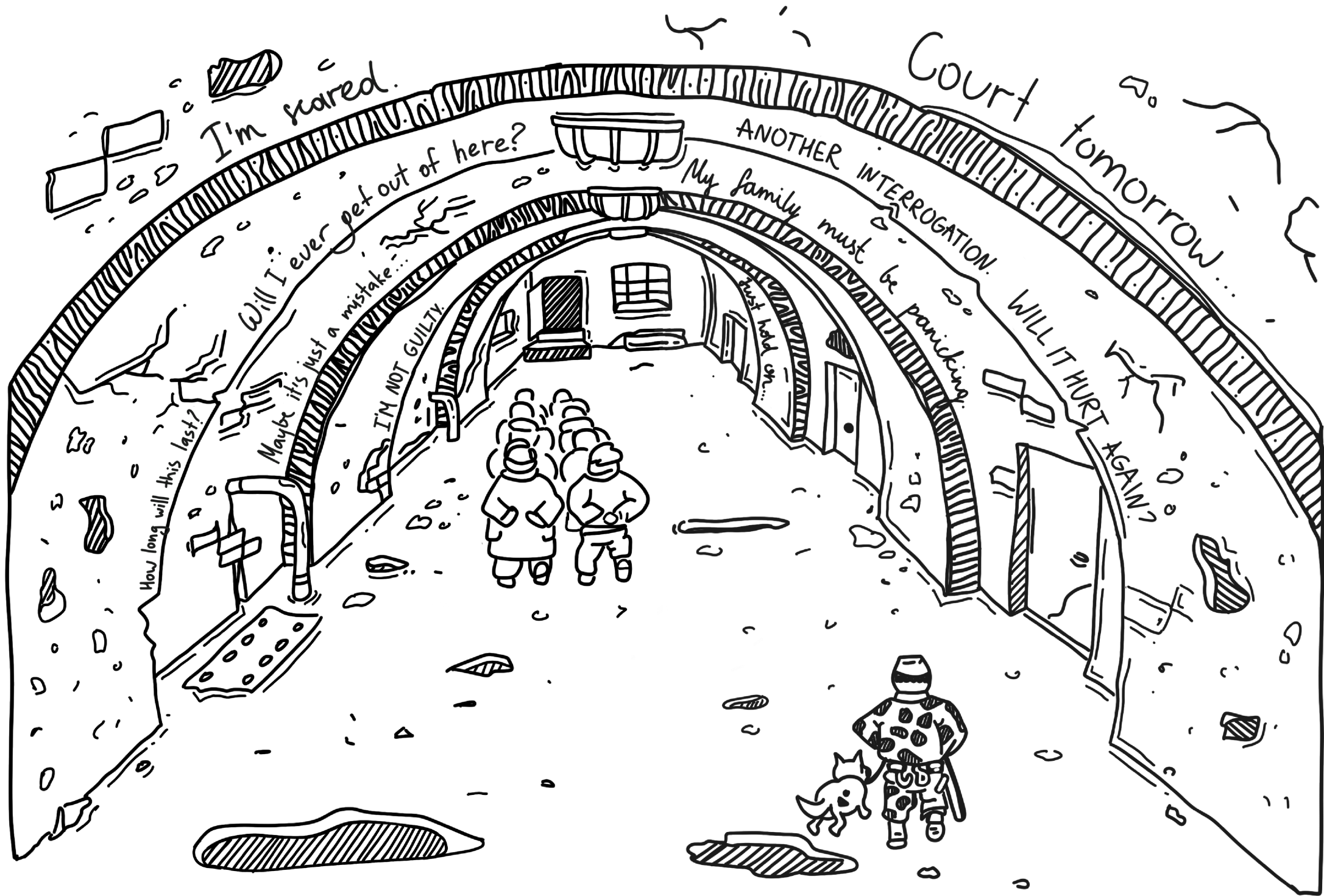
For Belarusians, the information in  
this guide might actually be useful. Sadly.  
That's the reality we live in.

Let's begin.



Part One

# WHERE THE JOURNEY BEGINS



I'm scared.

Will I ever get out of here?

Maybe it's just a mistake...

I'M NOT GUILTY.

My family must be panicking.

ANOTHER INTERROGATION.

WILL IT HURT AGAIN?

Court tomorrow...

How long will this last?

The journey begins in Pishchalauski Castle, on Valadarskaha Street in the heart of Minsk. The castle is often called Valadarka, but officially it's "Pre-trial detention center No. 1."

The castle was built in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and held many generations of prisoners of conscience before our storytellers arrived. Famous inmates have included the giants of Belarusian literature Vincent Dunin-Marcinkievič and Yakub Kolas. Even the Polish leader, Józef Piłsudski, has been through the "Minsk Bastille." The history of repression in Belarus goes back far earlier than 2020.

The castle has become the only institution in Belarus where executions are carried out. This makes the prison the only place of judicial execution in modern Europe. Over 400 people have been executed in the castle since 1991.

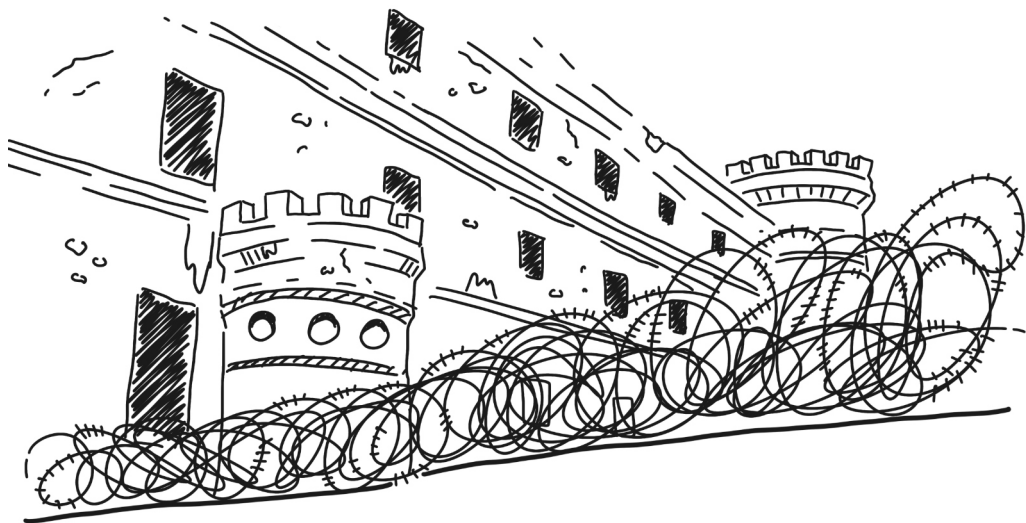




After 2 centuries of holding prisoners and witnessing tortures and executions, the most horrifying building in Minsk has finally been closed. In 2024, the detention center moved, along with the prisoners. This was partly due to its poor condition: no renovations had been made for over a century, and one of the towers collapsed in 2008. The illustrations of prisoners barely do the situation justice.

At the time of writing, it is not known what will become of the building. Yet seeing the castle being "set free" gives us hope that unjustly imprisoned people may soon be set free as well, and sooner rather than later.

Perhaps this place will become a museum and a memorial to its victims, but for now, we invite you to follow our narrators on a journey through a falling castle.



# WHO ARE YOU?

After All the procedures, you land in a cell.

You disrupt the usual order — so all eyes turn to you. They ask who you are, and why you're here.

Once they hear it's "for politics," they say with a smirk: "Everyone here loves the regime". It's the kind of joke every political prisoner gets.

You meet your new cellmates: some greet you with kindness, others keep their distance. But eventually, everyone gets used to each other.



# THE FIRST FEW DAYS

Before court, you're thrown into a holding cell.

What Awaits you?

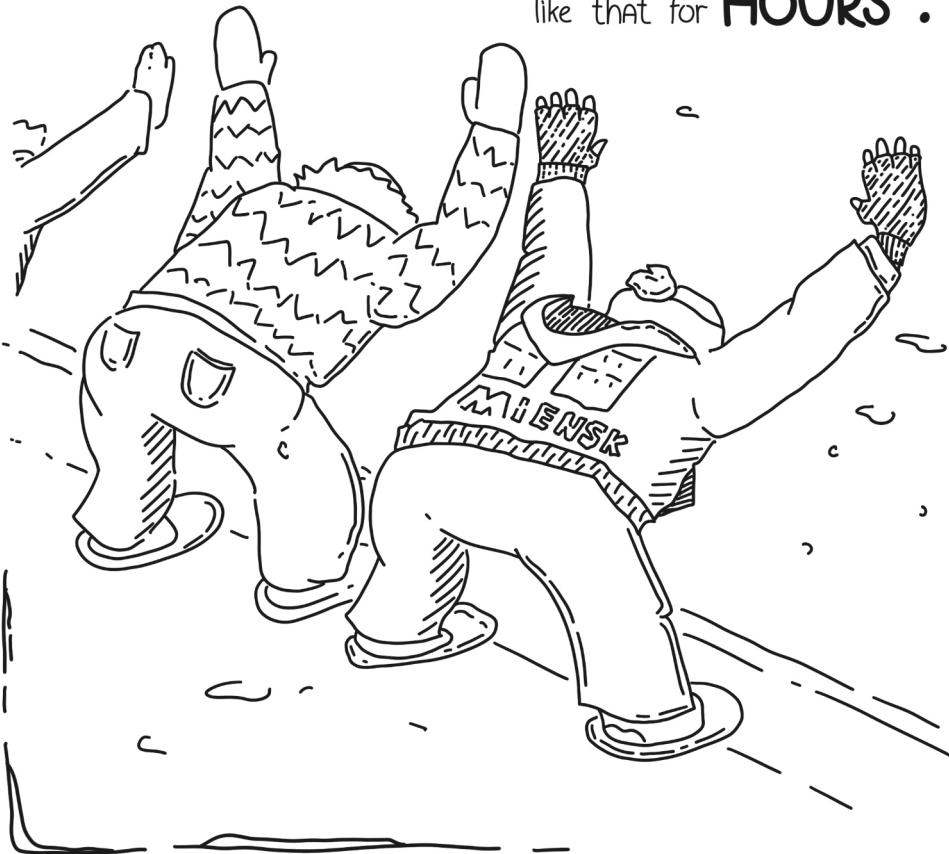
- Sleep on an icy floor—don't even think about a mattress. There isn't enough bedding for everyone, anyway.

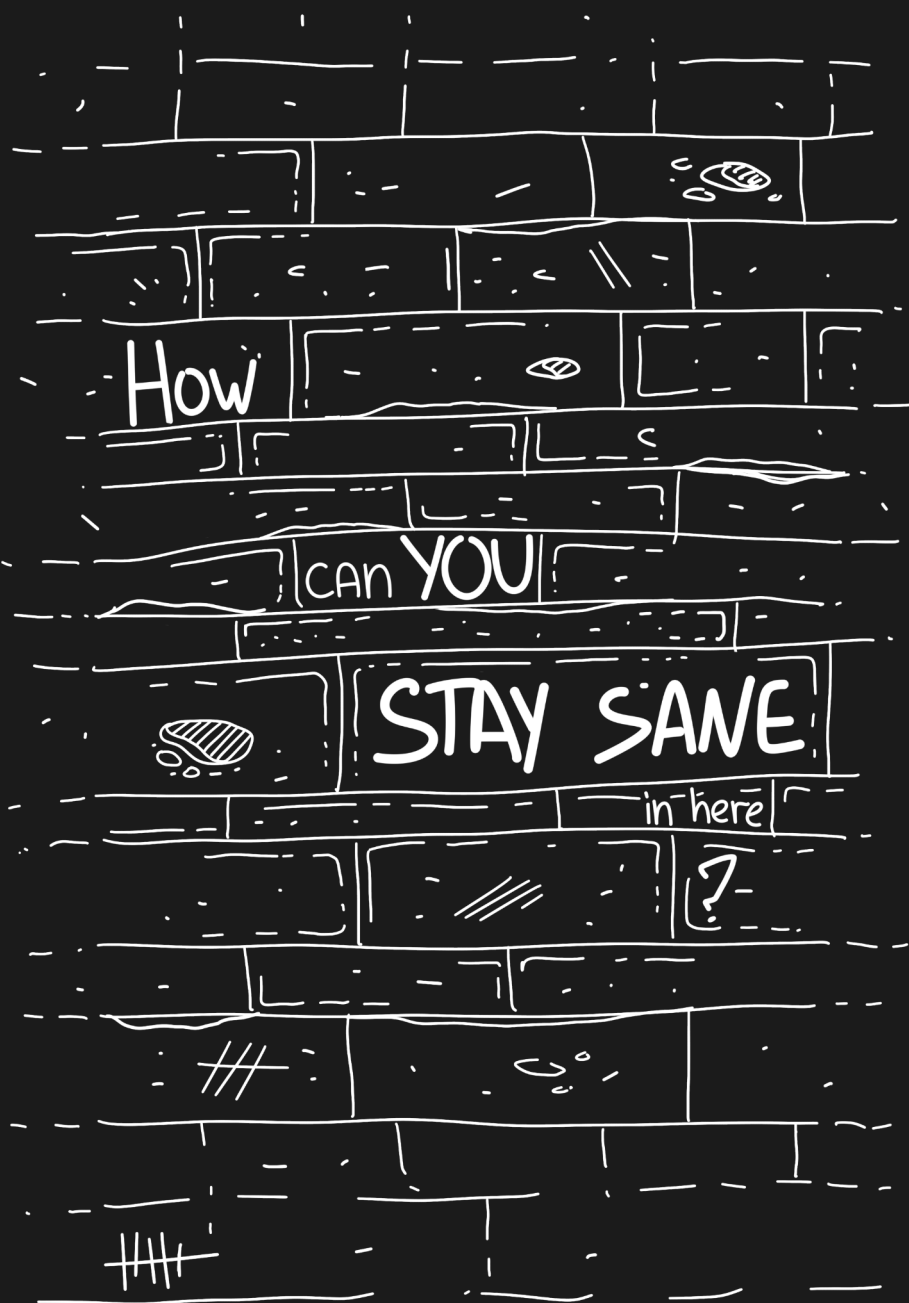


# HUMILIATION

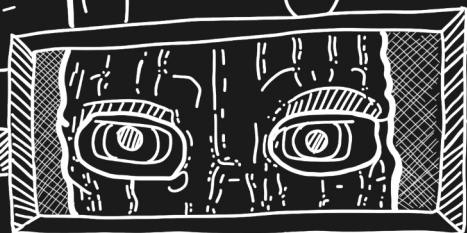
They will do everything they can  
to make you feel less than human.

"For example,  
they might make you stand  
in the **"SPLITS"** position  
against the wall — leave you  
like that for **HOURS**".





Every 15 minutes, A guard peeks through  
the slot into your cell— a silent reminder  
that you're being  
watched constantly.



Because to them,  
YOU ARE  
**THE ENEMY.**

BUT REMEMBER:

THEY

ARE

AFRAID

TOO

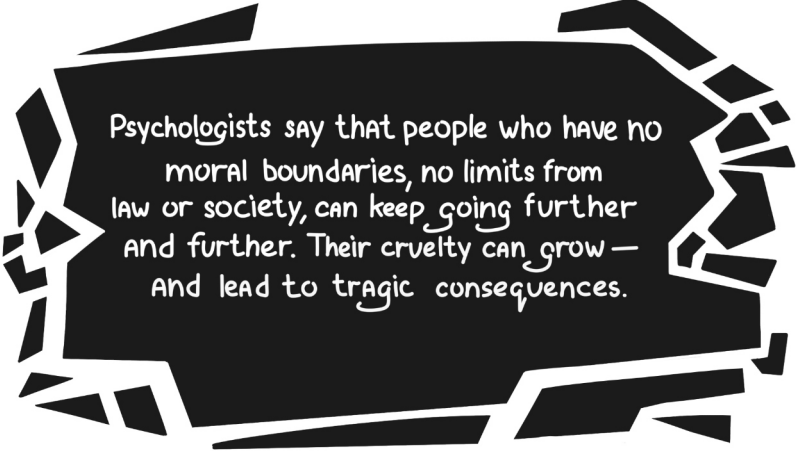


Deep down, even the inhumane ones know  
they are protecting evil, not truth. But

when you show them that—they panic.

Their view of the world is fragile,  
easy to shake. They fear that your conviction  
might become the wind that topples their  
house of cards.

And for every breath you take—  
you'll be punished.



Psychologists say that people who have no  
moral boundaries, no limits from  
law or society, can keep going further  
and further. Their cruelty can grow—  
And lead to tragic consequences.

Survival strategy in prison:



AGREE. AGREE. AGREE. NOD ALONG. PLAY THE GAME.





Part Two

# THE SURVIVAL MENU

# FOOD IN PRISON

can come from 3 sources:

Prison meals

Prison shop

Parcels from family



## ① prison meals

The meals have the worst taste and lowest nutritional value possible. Nutrition is so low that some prisoners get scurvy. If you have allergies or need a special diet, nobody cares. Good luck having ulcers in prison. If you haven't had stomach issues before, prison will give you some. For example, the infamous prison bread is good for everything from making toys to being a pillow, but not for eating. Eating it makes you sick. It's made from leftover stale bread, infinitely "resurrected" into new loaves.

## ② prison shop

The goods available from prison shops vary from prison to prison and over time. Often, you can buy mayonnaise to improve prison meals, or something sweet to improve your morale, or even something nutritious to support your body. But visits to the shop are rare, and prices are far higher than in the outside world. There's a cap on how much money you are allowed to spend. Even if kind supporters send you millions, you can still only spend a tiny sum. This sum must cover personal hygiene products, stamps, envelopes for letters, pens, paper to write, or some other essentials you might need. It's a choice between a full stomach, a clean body, and communication with the outside world.



## ③ parcels from family

Putting together a parcel is a puzzle with no solution. Again, rules differ: how big the parcel can be and what's allowed in it. Dried cranberries are okay, but raisins are not. Every piece of confectionery must be removed from its packaging. All the goods must be packed in transparent bags, weighed, and inventoried on paper, with the country of origin of the goods.

With effort, parcels can be sent to political prisoners, including essentials for survival. Vitamins, medicine, and warm clothes save prisoners' lives. However, both money transfers and parcels are extremely expensive for the senders. An imprisoned person becomes a liability and requires a lot of support simply to survive the sentence. A prisoner may also have been the main provider for their family.



# DISH OF THE DAY



A new day — a new dish.

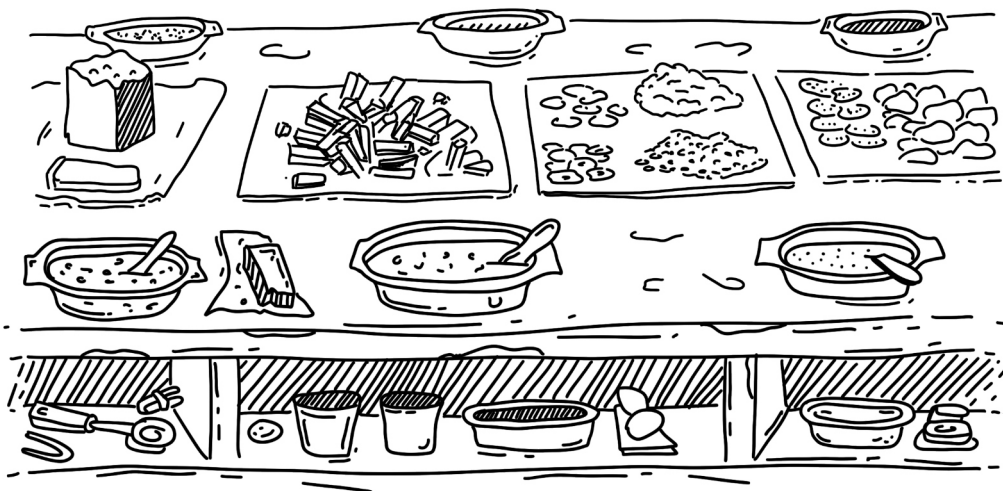
Today it's The Grave.

The local prison blend vaguely resembles  
a burial pit of tiny fishies.

But the taste, believe it or not, is better  
than it looks.

THIS IS EDIBLE.

# LUNCH



You already know what prison food is like. But this is one of the things you can actually improve. To make it at least a bit tastier, you grab something from your stash — some fat, sausage, or dried veggies. Everything is chopped and shared, then laid out on the table.



## DINNER: FISHY BUCKWHEAT.

The smell is already unbearable – but eating this substance is worse. But you have to.

There's no other way.

# THERE ARE NO FRIDGES IN JAIL

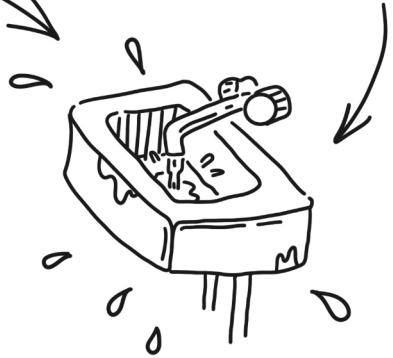
SO, HOW DO WE STORE FOOD?



Option 1: In cold seasons, you can hide food behind the metal vents—they stay cool like a fridge.



Option 2: If that trick gets discovered and forbidden, you make your own "fridge": fill any container with cold water, put your food in a plastic bag, and submerge it.



\*Of course, this only works if they didn't take your food right away...



# PRISON-STYLE MEAT

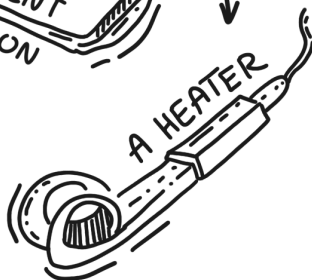
IF YOU'RE LUCKY ENOUGH  
TO GET A PIECE OF MEAT  
- FRY IT.

"One time, we got a small piece of meat  
in a care package and decided  
to fry it. It was the first fried  
meat we'd had in five months  
behind bars. It was the best  
meat of my life".

-Former prisoner

HERE'S WHAT  
A PRISON CHEF NEEDS:

A METAL MUG



Pour some oil into the mug, then place the heater inside. Wait for the oil to heat up, then carefully lower in the piece of meat, held on the bent spoon—your frying pan.

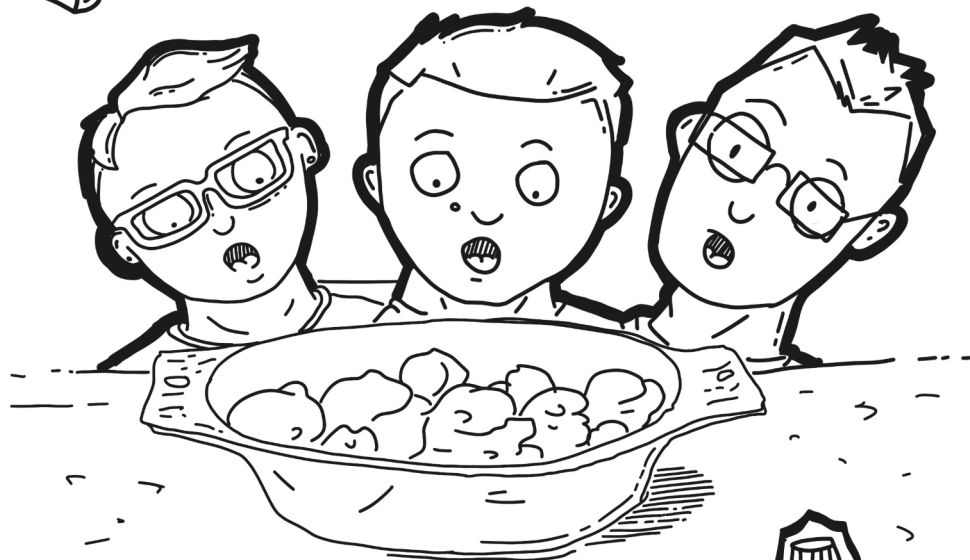
Wait 2-5 minutes.



Once in a while —  
**= DUMPLINGS =**

for dinner.

And somehow, that's enough to lift your spirits.



Especially if you've got  
**= MAYONNAISE =**



That's already TWO reasons to smile —  
not even counting the best part:  
sharing the meal with good people.

WHAT BROUGHT YOU  
A LITTLE JOY TODAY?  
PAUSE, THINK — AND WRITE IT DOWN.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

≧ Police can't see it ≦  
😊

Sometimes  
in prison,

**A CAKE**

SUDDENLY  
appears.

AND

in that moment  
you feel like dancing.

And if you feel like dancing –  
you should dance.

Especially if it's  
someone's

**BIRTHDAY**

or another  
– special day. –

# How to bake **A CAKE** behind bars.

Here's how to create  
a little taste of home:

- ① Spread condensed milk on the crunchy cake layers from the prison shop.
- ② Add crushed cookies or dried fruit from your parcel on top.



# — A TRADITION —

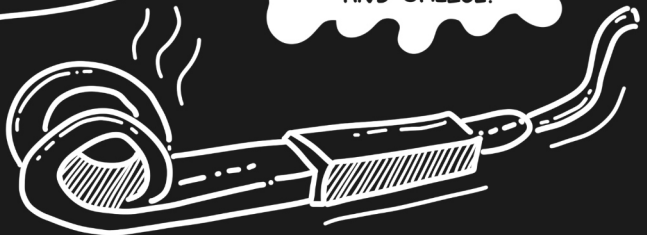
You've probably heard of it — but eventually, you'll see it made for real. When something is being celebrated in the cell (or someone new has arrived), IT'S TIME TO MAKE...

# CHIFIR'



Chifir' is a very strong prison tea — and everyone makes it a bit differently — so here's one way to do it.

INSIDER TIP:  
CHIFIR' GOES BEST WITH  
BITTER CHOCOLATE, DRIED FISH,  
OR EVEN RAW ONION  
AND CHEESE.

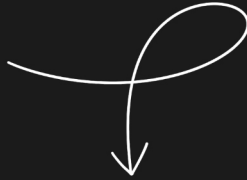


How to make chifir'

# "VALADARKA - STYLE"

(Try at your own risk - seriously!)

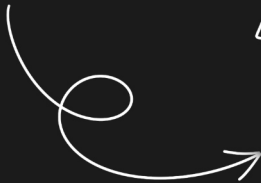
1. Pour water into any container;  
about half-full. Bring it to a boil.



2. Once it's boiling, dump in black  
leaf tea (or granulated tea).  
A lot - about half the volume  
of the water.



3. Let it boil for  
a few minutes.



4. Turn off the heat, cover it with  
something warm so it  
keeps steaming.

5. Wait. Pour. Sip.  
Enjoy (if you dare).







Part Three

# THINGS TO DO IN PRISON

# PRISON HANDICRAFT

Make jewelry using  
A revolutionary, cutting-edge method.

## You'll need:

- ✓ A cotton pad
- ✓ A burner
- ✓ some oil

burner →

cotton  
pad + some  
oil

plastic

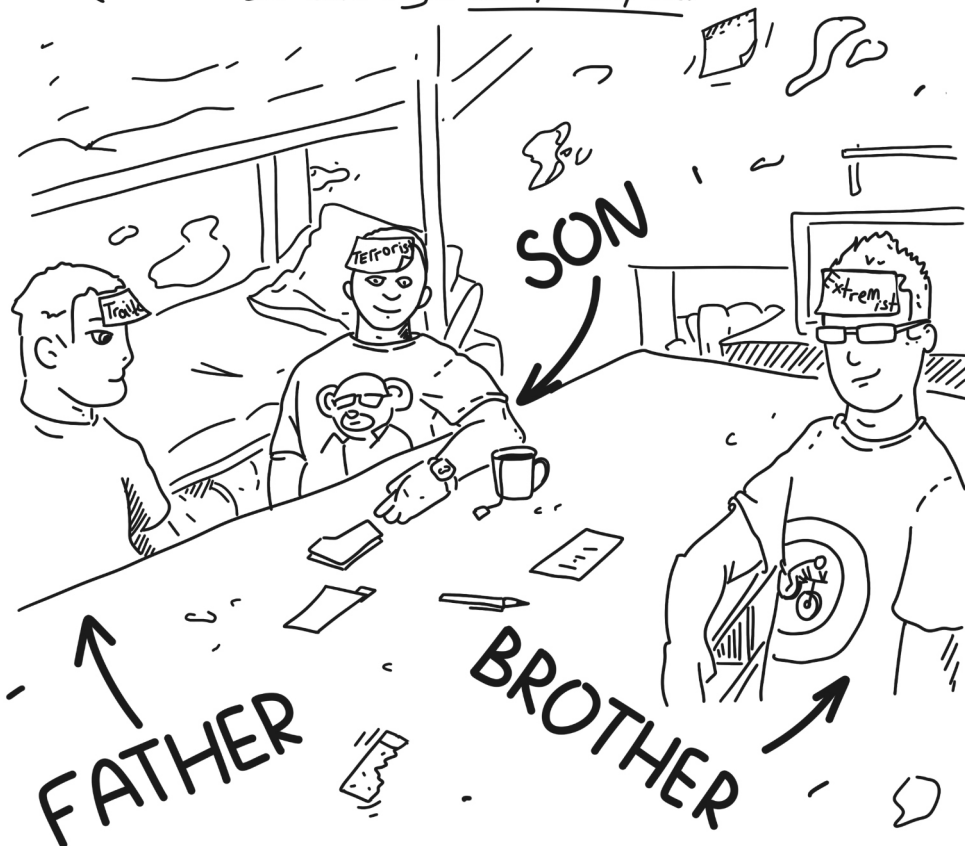
Melt the plastic over a burner made from oil  
and a cotton pad. Once the plastic softens,  
roll it into small balls and stick them  
together to make a pendant.



# WHO AM I?

That question gets answered for you by the prison  
Administration: "terrorist" or "extremist".

But don't forget who you really are.

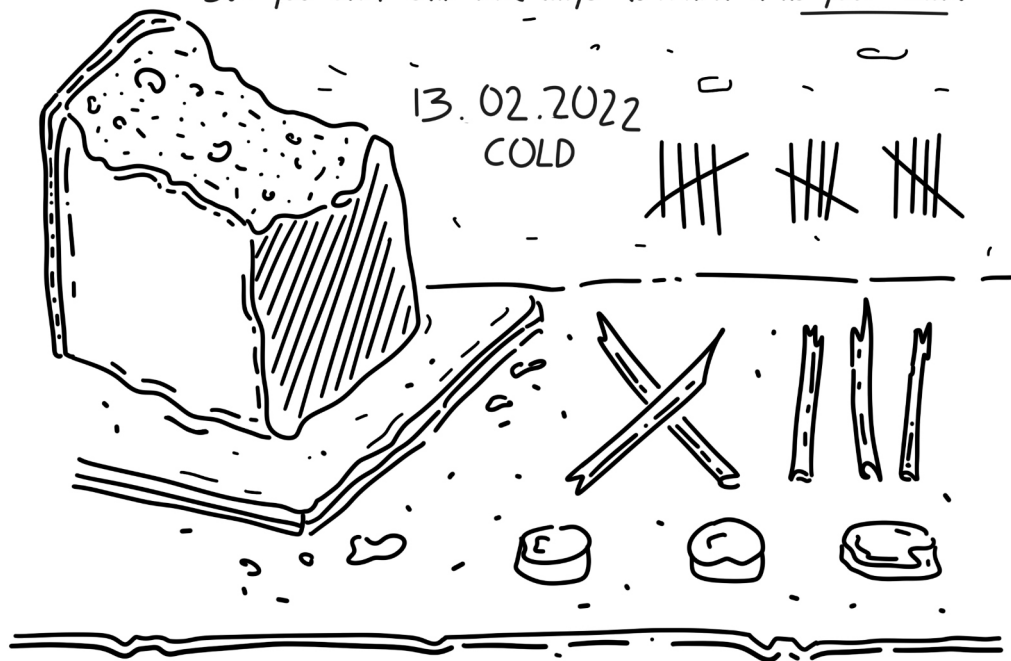


You're a human being.  
Just like everyone else.

# There are NO CLOCKS in prison.

Time doesn't belong to you — it belongs to them.

But you can still find ways to mark it as your own.



You start marking time with morning checks and evening headcounts.

You can make a "watch" from toothbrush bristle and bits of bread.

1 mark - 15 minutes,

One look at your clock tells you how long it's been since the guard last peeked through the slot.

# WANNA PLAY "THOUSAND"?

If there's some bread left — you can shape it into a dice for the game.

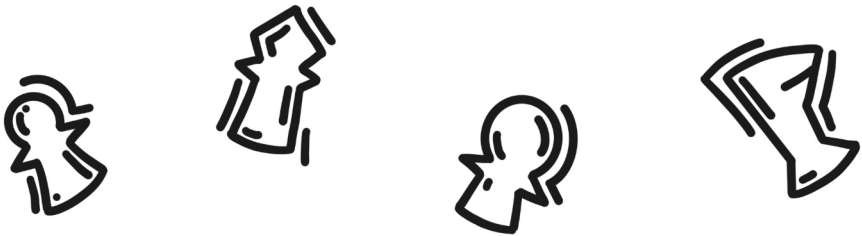
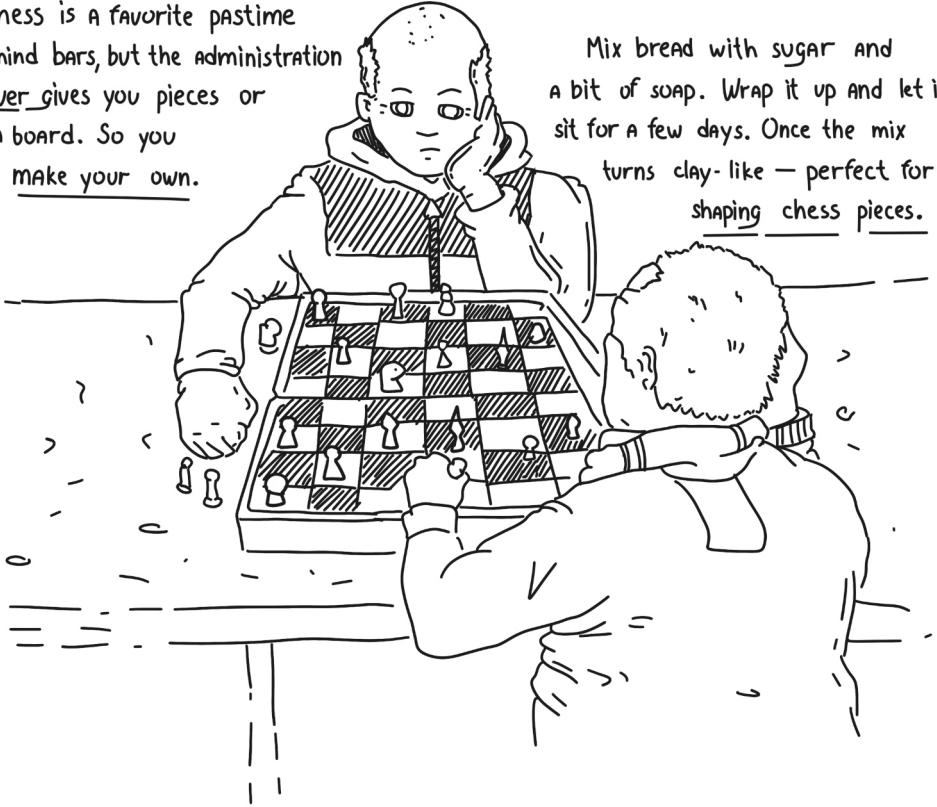


Got even more bread?

# THEN IT'S TIME FOR CHESS:

Chess is a favorite pastime  
behind bars, but the administration  
never gives you pieces or  
a board. So you  
make your own.

Mix bread with sugar and  
a bit of soap. Wrap it up and let it  
sit for a few days. Once the mix  
turns clay-like — perfect for  
shaping chess pieces.

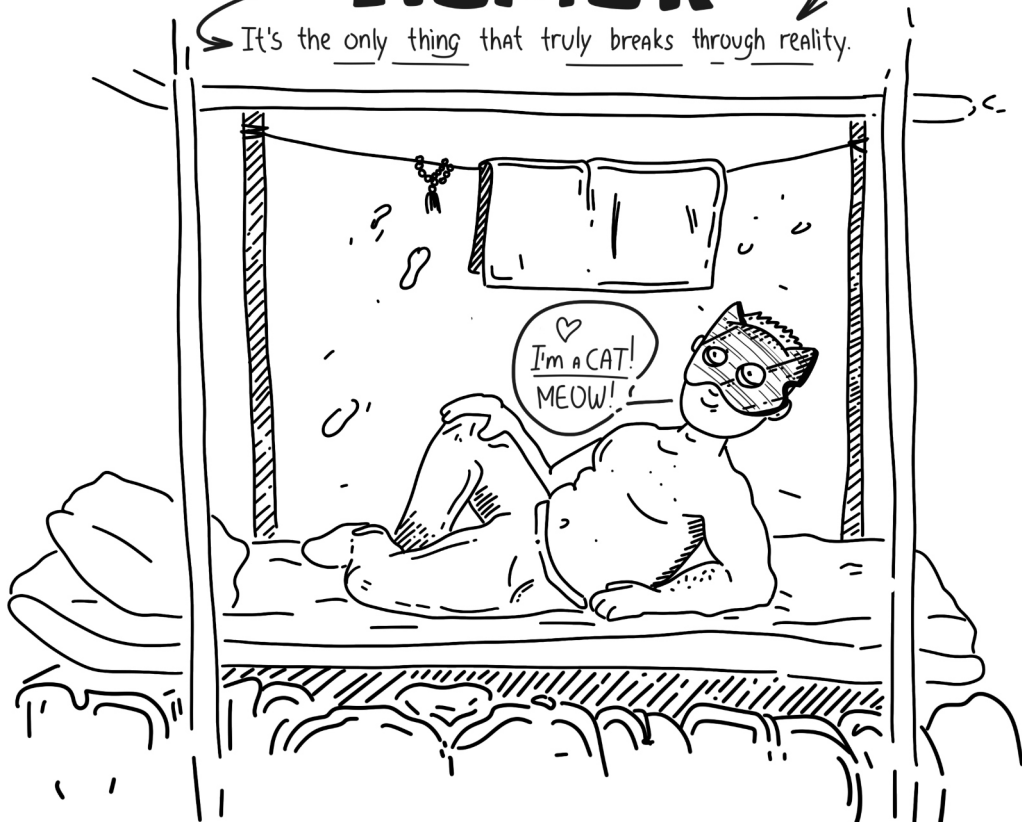


# MEOW

Yes – even in prison, there's still space for

## HUMOR

It's the only thing that truly breaks through reality.



Like this cat mask, crafted from a notebook page and worn only during court hearings.

IT WAS LEGENDARY.  
AND RISKY.

This kind of joke can cost you a lot-  
the guy had guts.  
Not recommended if you  
ever end up inside.



# A PLACE TO WRITE YOUR OWN JOKE

What made you laugh today? And yesterday?

MEOW!

---

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Peek  
-A-  
boo

HEY!  
YOU  
THERE?

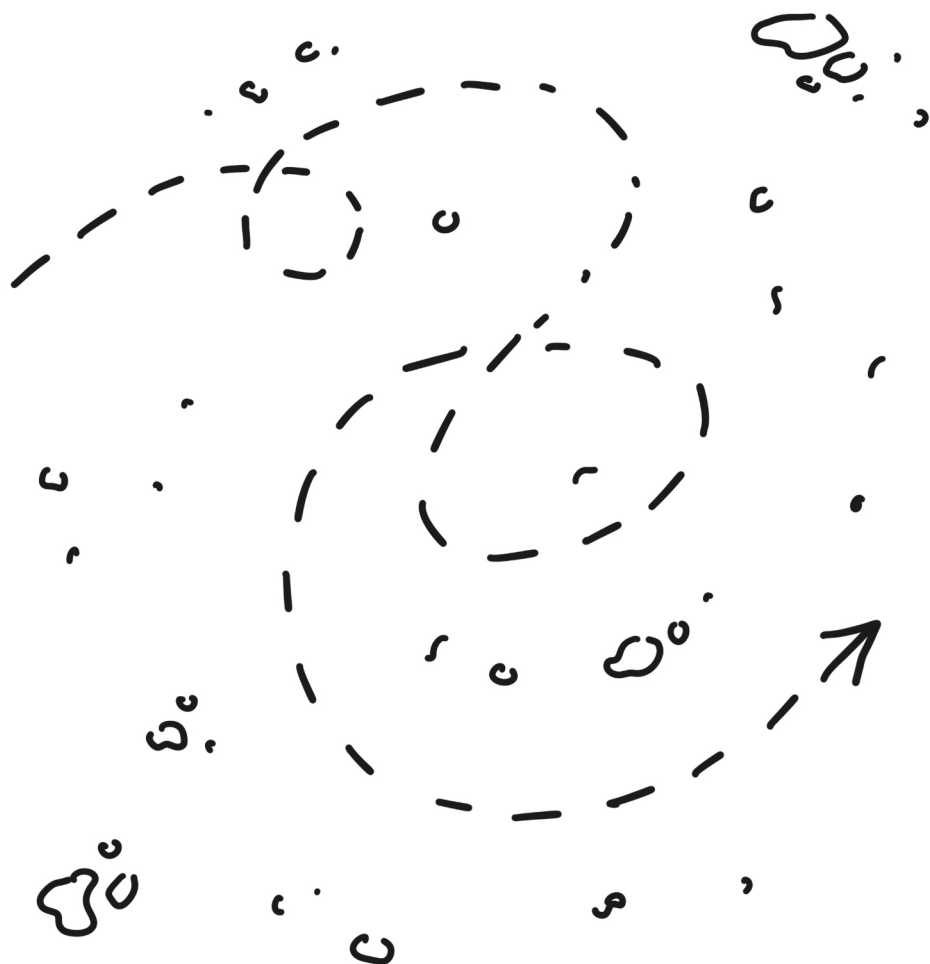


A guy returned to the cell after court, but no one was back from the yard yet. So, while waiting, he lit a cigarette and puffed smoke through the food slot—just to say hi to the next cell.

# "CAUTION: DOORS OPENING".

Not to freedom — but to a concrete box.

Let's take a walk. It's yard time.





FREEDOM  
Belarus!

FCK  
PTN

MARFA

SPRING  
WILL COME

LUKA SUCKS

Viva  
MATCHA

FREE

DIE

You could figure out the size  
of the yard just by taking  
a few steps. The only thing  
you can do there is walk  
in circles. Booooooring.  
That's when the walls  
come in handy - you  
start scratching  
on them. (Technically  
forbidden. But hey-

YOU  
ARE  
STILL  
A HUMAN.)

This spread is your wall.

In prison, people would draw, scratch, and write on the walls just to let something out.

Now it's your turn. Grab a pen, a pencil, or just your thoughts and leave a mark.



Don't hold back. Say what you want to say.

Whatever is in your head or heart—write it here.

There's no censorship.



During yard time, you can play

# MAFIA



But you always remember:  
THE REAL MAFIA IS  
JUST BEHIND THE DOOR.

When you see the first spring sunlight  
after a long winter  
you feel an illegal warmth that breaks  
the laws of physics and  
hits you right in the soul.



## THE SUN LOVES EVERYONE

Even if you're behind bars, and the sky above you  
is just a patch of blue through the wire —  
♡ IT'S STILL SHINING FOR YOU. ♡





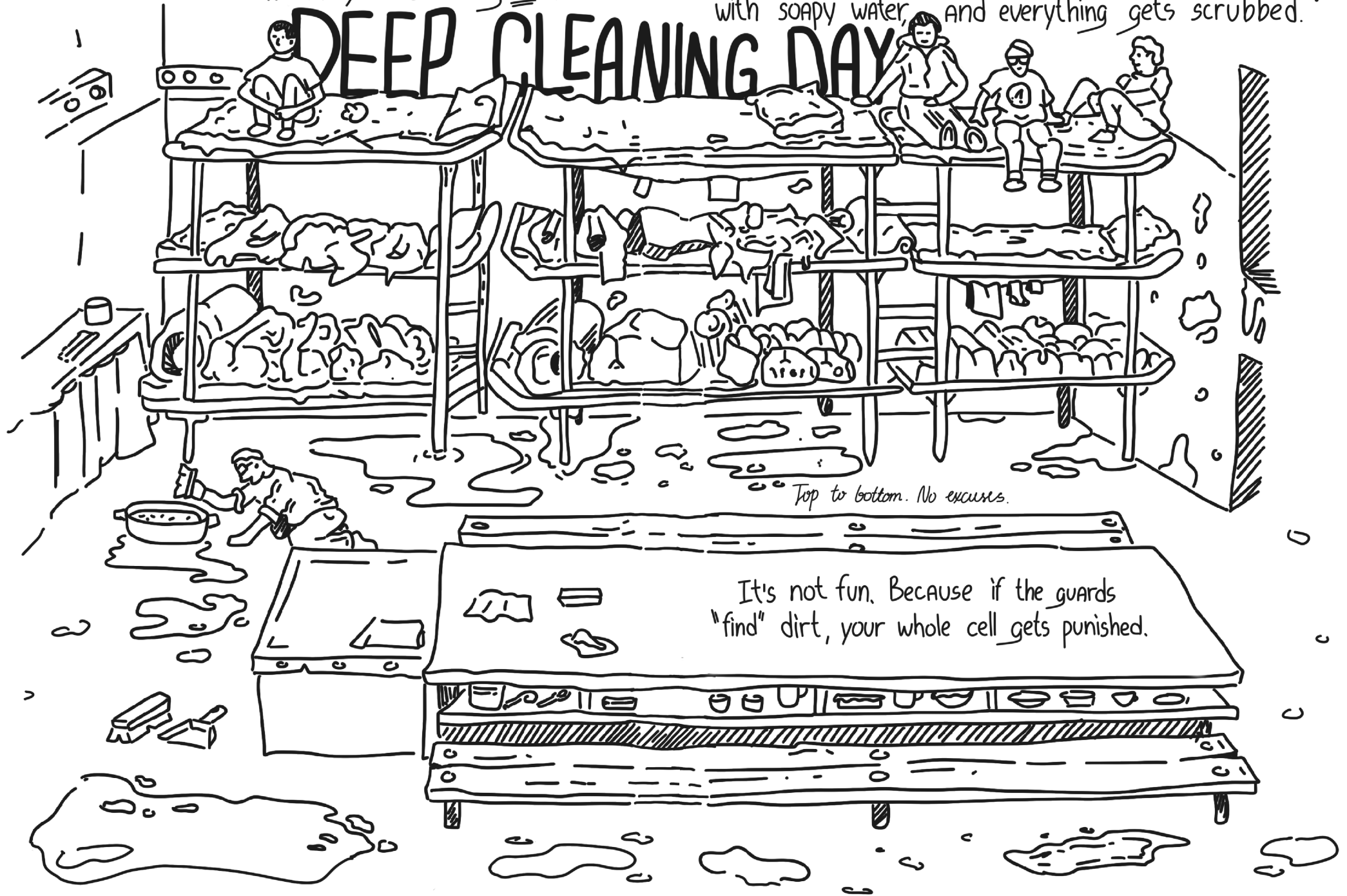
Part Four

# HYGIENE (KIND OF...)

It might look like CHAOS, but  
what you're seeing is a

So about once a month, bags come out  
from under the bunks, the floor is flooded  
with soapy water, and everything gets scrubbed.

# DEEP CLEANING DAY



In jail, you let go of a lot of things — even  
the ones you love, the ones that felt like part of you.  
Sometimes you even say goodbye to your hair,  
because long hair  
is banned.



Your haircut will be done by fellow prisoners.

SO WHY NOT EXPERIMENT?

# CAN'T FIND A PLACE TO DO LAUNDRY?

You just didn't look hard enough.  
It's right there in front of you...

THE BIN.



Wash your clothes in it.  
That's normal here.

# HOMELESS PEOPLE

Prison guards will often exploit blameless, particularly defenceless or marginalized people in order to humiliate prisoners. The homeless are particularly "useful" for this.



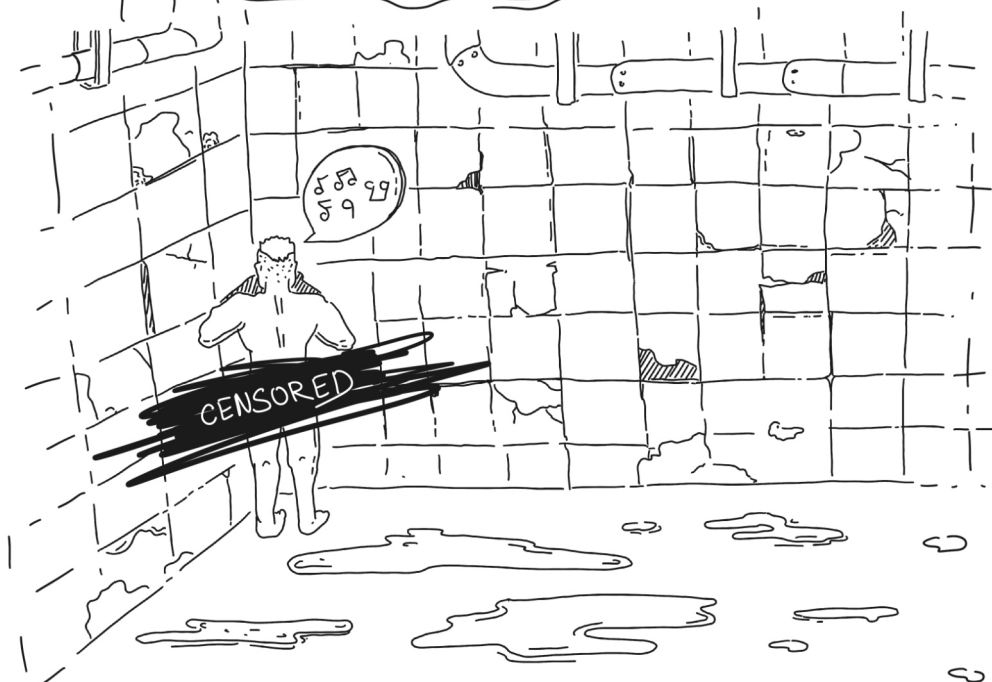
Normally, a person from the streets would be sent to get washed first but "political cells" receive homeless people as they are.

Getting a homeless person thrown in the cell is a form of torture because the prisoners must then care for that person.

"Well of course we helped him wash, shared our soaps and shampoo, and gave him a change of clothes."

"Sometimes they are not in a very solid state of mind. The old woman just sat in the corner and bugs were crawling all over her! We couldn't convince her to take a shower."

"The man in our cell had a wounded leg. It was dirty and smelly. We kept asking the guards for help, or at least give us some clean bandages so we could help him ourselves, but we received only silence."



"After that? Well, they get released back to the streets empty-handed. Until eventually they're arrested to be used again."

Menstrual hygiene products  
in prison are a real

TREASURE. Getting  
them is almost  
IMPOSSIBLE.



What do you do when your period starts?

You make improvised pads using whatever you can:

↓  
Tear up your clothes —  
T-shirts, socks, underwear —  
And fold the rags into "pads".

↓  
Or: wrap bread in a plastic  
bag, then cover it with  
toilet paper.



↓  
If you don't have bread  
or clothes — just  
use toilet paper.

To wash, use a plastic bottle.  
If you warm it up, it becomes your  
only hot running water.





If you're lucky enough to receive real hygiene products (maybe through a parcel or after a medical check), you'll want to treasure them—save them for court visits.

Because for days, even weeks, you'll sit in your cell or in a prison van with no chance to wash, no access to basics, no relief.

We hope that someday these products will be available in every cell. And that no one has to hide a tampon like contraband during a cell search.



The scale of gender-specific suffering in prisons of Belarus is impossible to fit on two pages. It deserves a whole book.





Part Five

# TRIALS

( You'll need to stay sharp )



Dear Yura,

It's been a week since I was moved to the unit, and I've started working in the prison laundry. Our team is sewing summer police jackets for the police — I iron them. I pray as I work.

There's always music playing inside me — a constant humming. I can't hear it out loud, or sing, or hum out loud, but it's there. A kind of quiet, musical devotion. And I'm at peace with that — with art.

The song I've been singing lately was written by an 8-year-old girl, Alisa. Now I get to share it with a few people close to me — it's a small joy.

These kids make me so proud.

The guards didn't let me keep any letters with Easter Greetings.

I still wish well to the people who followed unlawful orders. I hope their hearts will open to kindness one day, and that they find the strength to ask for forgiveness.

I miss hearing the Belarusian language more than I can say. Out of all the women in this prison, only two of us speak it. You feel it here — how much the country has been stripped of its language.

But you, who still speak in your mother tongue — you haven't been broken.

With God,  
Volya.



# SOMEONE HAS BEEN BEATEN.

You can see what happened. You'll probably never see those responsible — the guards — held accountable.

You feel ANGRY. Of course you do.

But anger won't help.  
Right now, what the victim needs most is

CARE.



Here's what you should know and do:

never place a beaten person on the top bunk. If they lose consciousness and fall, it could be fatal.

If they're conscious, ask them:

- Do you hear ringing in your ears?
- Are you constantly dizzy or nauseous?
- Does everything feel foggy or unclear?

These can be signs of a concussion or brain injury. If they say yes — they need urgent medical help, even if you have to fight for it.

# NO AIR

When you can't breathe, you've got two choices:

Try to figure out  
what's blocking the air—  
and do something about it!

Or just keep pretending  
everything is fine.



In your cell, you might have a fan.

But don't get your hopes up. It doesn't bring  
in fresh air. It just stirs the dust and makes it feel  
like air is moving. In reality, it's the same  
suffocating heat.



# LETTERS to FREEDOM

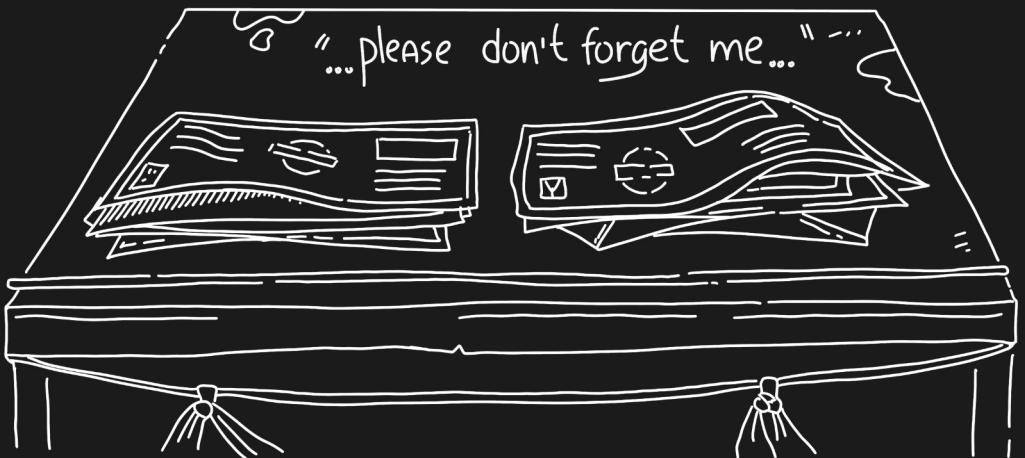
Tom, I'm sorry,

I don't know if you'll ever see this

I only see the sun through

One day I'll tell you everything

"...please don't forget me..."





I wish I could be with you right now.

"I dreamed of being free to

You know, you're stronger than

These walls are crushing me.

There's a lump in my throat, but

"I still can't believe this is real."





Part Six

# THE WAY FORWARD

# WHAT NOW?

YOU'RE NOT BEHIND BARS —  
AND THAT ALREADY MEANS A LOT

Now that you know,  
what can you do?

☐ Tell someone about it.

☐ Write a letter to a prisoner.

☐ Share this book.

☐ Don't pretend  
it's not happening.

☐ Look at the sky —  
and really see it.

☐ Stay kind. Stay human.

# THIS ONE'S *for* YOU

Write yourself a message — A reminder, a note of hope, or a thank-you for making it through this book.

Say something kind. Say something true. Say something you need to hear. There's no wrong way to begin.

[illegible]

# ADVICE FOR YOURSELF, IF YOU'VE JUST COME BACK FROM PRISON

- ☐ 1. Your experience matters – but it doesn't define you.

What you went through is part of your life. But it's not all of you.

- ☐ 2. Acknowledge that you've changed.  
You are not the same as before. You can even write it down: "I WAS... / I AM ...". This helps you understand your story – and move forward with it.

- ☐ 3. Let yourself feel, and reach out for support.

Talk to people, write, record, draw – whatever helps you process what you've been through. There are no wrong feelings.

- ☐ 4. Stay connected.  
Family, friends, groups, therapists – let them in when you're ready to talk. Ask for help. And offer it when you can.

☐ 5. Rebuild routine.

work, rest, hobbies, meals — every small rhythm helps. Even if it feels pointless, stick to it.



6. Accept support when it comes.

People might not know what to say. But some will try. That effort matters — even if they don't say it perfectly.



7. Get professional help if you need it.

If a month goes by and you still feel overwhelmed, have flashbacks, panic, or feel stuck — talk to a specialist. It's not weakness. It's self-care



8. Keep living.

Do what feels meaningful to you. This chapter is a part of you — but it doesn't have to hold you in place. Move forward.



# HOW TO SUPPORT A LOVED ONE WHO HAS RETURNED FROM PRISON?

Your loved one has gone through a traumatic experience. How can you best support them? Here are recommendations prepared by a professional psychologist:

☐ 1. Be there, but don't push.

They might not want to talk right away.  
Let them know you're here – even if they're not ready for conversation.



☐ 2. Respect their boundaries.

Don't say: "You need to talk to someone right now."  
They might not. Sometimes it takes weeks or months.  
Give space without disappearing – even just sitting quietly nearby can mean a lot.



☐ 3. Listen actively. Don't judge.

What they experienced might be hard to understand. If something seems strange, stay open. Don't correct or dismiss – just hear them out.



☐ 4. Help them feel safe again.


Ask if anything triggers memories or panic, and work together to make things feel more predictable and calm.






☐ 5. Validate their emotions.

Don't rush to say: "Forget it. Move on!"  
What they feel makes sense – even if it's anger, silence, or numbness.




☐ 6. Avoid empty reassurances.

Saying "It'll be fine" or "Everything will go back to normal" might feel hollow. You don't know that – and they'll know you don't.




☐ 7. Be ready for long-term support.

Trauma can show up later. Let them take the lead, and help rebuild routines at their pace.



☐ 8. Remember: they're still the same person.

They might have changed – but they're still themselves. Let them be more than just what happened to them.



☐ 9. If they need help, help them get it.

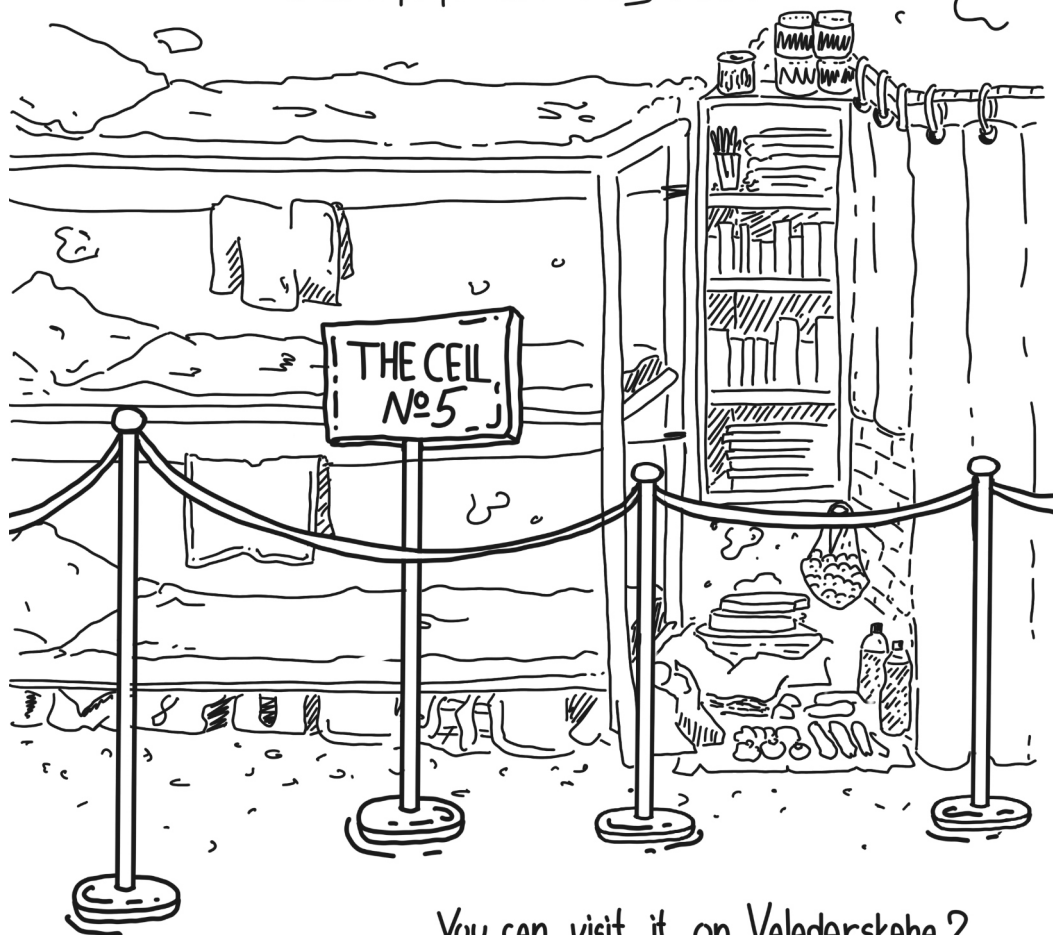
If things feel heavy, support in reaching out – to professionals, groups, friends. Offer to go with them. Organize help if they need it.

# THE FUTURE

You walk through a museum that tells the story of repression and the fight for freedom.

The air is free now — you're in Belarus, liberated.

Only the prison walls and bunks remain, as a reminder of what people endured to get here.



You can visit it on Valadarskaha 2.

# HOW TO BUILD THE FUTURE

The future doesn't arrive on its own —  
it's created by people. By you. By all of us.  
So act: help shape the future with your  
hands, and help others shape theirs too.



## SUPPORT

Political prisoners who've been released.  
Support them emotionally and financially.  
Help them rebuild life outside prison.



## SPEAK OUT

About those still imprisoned. Tell their stories  
to your friends, your community, the world.  
Keep them present.  
Keep them heard.



THANK YOU FOR  
READING THIS BOOK!

We hope to see you again.



Dear friends,  
This project became possible thanks to you!  
Your support, care, and belief are truly powerful.  
Thank you from the bottom of our hearts.  
You are incredible!

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(NOTES & THOUGHTS)

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