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I remember well the first time, as a child, that I became aware of the power of literature to pull a reader into physical and mental participation with a story. As I read Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Farmer Boy*, her sumptuous descriptions of rich fried doughnuts, fragrant pies, jellies, jams, crisp-skinned roast goose, and rich brown gravy left me physically hungry. There was some kind of literary magic at work; by the time I was done reading I was not only ravenously hungry, but the food passages had also created a setting of warmth and comfort, prosperity and security. I read the book many times over in awe of the discovery that mere words on a page could work such magic. No other literary description of food affected me as powerfully until I read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

As I read this work, I found Solzhenitzyn's portrayal of prison camp meals particularly gripping and moving. Solzhenitzyn writes in great detail about Shukhov's maneuverings to acquire food; he carefully describes the pitiful meals and even explains customs and manners concerning the eating of prison food. The food motif in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* serves to draw the reader into the novel, helping him or her to empathize with the prisoners and share in their plight both physical and, I believe, by analogy, spiritual. Additionally, and I think most importantly for Solzhenitsyn, by drawing attention to the base nature of the prison food he focuses attention on the harsh conditions in these camps and on a political wrong in need of correction.

Solzhenitsyn himself had experienced the Gulag prison system, knew its horrors first hand, and more than anything else, wanted others to know what was happening (Cismaru 99; Emerson 65). He writes in his 1970 Nobel Prize speech that "ingrained in Russian literature has been the notion that a writer can do much among his own people – and that he must" ("Nobel" 58). He believed that an author, through literature, had "the skill to make a narrow, obstinate human being aware of others' far off grief and joy [. . . where] propaganda, coercion, and scientific proofs are all powerless" ("Nobel" 57). Solzhenitsyn set himself the task of being an instrument of change for his country, but as a writer under the repressive Soviet System he never expected that he would ever see *One Day* printed in his lifetime (Hanne 151). He thought that if such

a work were published, he would want it to have broad appeal and to reach as large a readership as possible, and he believed that a short, vivid novel might do this more effectively and more rapidly than some scholarly, academic account (Hanne 155).

Solzhenitsyn immortalizes simple meals in his little novel because he knows first hand that food is the prime consideration of men struggling for survival and that, therefore, a food motif lends strength and realism to his story. This carefully chosen motif is of utmost importance in a novel of this sort because readers often find it easy to read a work and toss it aside mentally unless something in the text helps them to connect. Early in the story, Solzhenitsyn piques the reader's sympathy with a description of a labor camp breakfast that he himself must have eaten many times: bread, gruel, and kasha, which often consisted of coarse grass seed and not real buckwheat (Kern 7; *One Day* 17). The main character, Shukhov, describes the gruel as a thin fish and vegetable soup, the contents of which does not change much "from one day to the next" (*One Day* 17). Depending on the season of the year, it might contain salted carrots or even nettles; cabbage was the vegetable available on the day of the story. Solzhenitsyn tells us that Shukhov savors every scanty bit of fish, picking the rotten flesh from among cabbage leaves, eating scales and head with eyes intact and then crunching and sucking the bones (*One Day* 15, 17).

Gary Kern writes in "Ivan the Worker" that "the details of the prison camp's conditions are not thrust upon the reader in such

a way that will shock him, but rather in a way that will cause him to think – to add, subtract, and compare [. . .] if he goes on thinking and if he calculates, the impression will deepen” (8). Solzhenitsyn offers the reader food equations: lunch on the work site consists of two ounces – which works out to a scant one fourth cup of groats per man. At least that was the amount carried to the work site.

Shukhov reports that the trustees who helped the cook got an extra portion and that the health inspector and cook could eat as much as they wanted. And so, Ivan says, they were served a watery mush and no one dared ask “how much of the ration they’d really put in it” for to do so brought punishment (*One Day* 82). For the evening meal the cook serves four bowls from a ladle that holds a pint and a half of gruel. Thus, each man gets just three-quarters cup of watery soup skimmed from the top of the cauldron so that the guards and camp workers can have the solid foods from the bottom. This and another ration of bread doled out according to a man’s work output make up the meal that ends a strenuous day of work (*One Day* 167, 168). As Michael Hanne writes, Solzhenitsyn hoped that readers “drawn into intense participation in the details, the physical privation, the cold, [and especially] the hunger” might care enough to begin to work a change in the Soviet system (150).

Publication of *One Day* in the Soviet Union was nothing short of a miracle. Veniamin Teush, a friend of Solzhenitsyn, read the manuscript of *One Day* a year before its publication and predicted that if ever published, the novel would explode like an “atom

bomb,” changing Soviet life forever (Hanne 147). In 1962, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev also read a manuscript of the work and took it under his wing. He advocated with Glavlit (the official censorship committee) and the Presidium to have the work published, believing that the novel could be an important part of his de-Stalinization plan (Hanne 148; Medvedev 4, 9). Khrushchev assumed that readers would accept the story as an attack on Stalinism, a shameful period in Soviet history, and one he was trying to erase. Michael Hanne writes that Solzhenitsyn’s simple plan to pull the reader in proved so effective that Russian citizens waited in library lines for hours, sometimes returning daily for months, just to get a chance to keep the novel for forty-eight hours (147). As Teush predicted, the novel produced stunning effects: the story quickly slipped from Khrushchev’s control (Hanne 163).

Khrushchev did not anticipate the affective power of Solzhenitsyn’s story. First, the book brought attention to hundreds of thousands of former prisoners of the Gulag and made people sympathetic to them; it also encouraged many more of them to write about their experiences, thereby opening dialogue on topics that the Soviet leadership did not want discussed (Hanne 150). This heightened awareness led to a public expectation that something should be done about the camps, which were still in existence at the time *One Day* was published and were, by some accounts, actually worse than they had been under Stalin (Hanne 164). The book cast doubt on what Hanne calls the “Party’s own grand narrative” that

the people were in power. If the people actually were in power, many asked, why would they tolerate such oppression? (Hanne 165).

Soon, readers in other nations were taking notice. Early in 1963, translations began to appear in a number of other countries over which the Soviet government had no control. Hanne writes that, to the Western world, which tended to make little distinction between the governments of Stalin and Khrushchev, *One Day* became a symbol of the failings of Soviet Socialism. In allowing Solzhenitsyn publication, the Soviet authorities had almost handed over a weapon against themselves (168). While Solzhenitsyn's novel did not bring the immediate change in the camps that he had hoped for, critic Edward Ericson notes that *One Day*, in breaking a long official conspiracy of silence, became "the first crack in the Berlin Wall" (28). Because of the effect Solzhenitsyn wrought on Soviet history, David Remnick calls him the "dominant [Russian] writer of the twentieth century" (110). Indeed, Remnick notes that *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* began a "cultural thaw" in the Soviet Union that so greatly disturbed leadership, they eventually "banned Solzhenitsyn from print" (118).

Writing for publication under the Soviet regime posed a particular problem for Solzhenitsyn concerning his expression of faith. *One Day* is partially autobiographical, detailing Solzhenitsyn's own experiences in the labor camps. Solzhenitsyn held a deep Christian faith but faced a dilemma in describing the prisoners'

spiritual plight. Shukhov has some rudimentary faith; he asks God for protection when he accidentally brings a scrap of metal back to camp, and he thanks God that he has made it to the end of another day (*One Day* 149, 195). However, Gary Kern writes that we must remember this was originally a Soviet text and Solzhenitsyn could not dare to make Shukhov an overtly Christian hero and expect to be published (27). Instead, using another food motif, Solzhenitsyn draws an interesting parallel between the faith lives of Shukhov and Alyoshka, his Baptist bunkmate. Early in the novel, Shukhov notes that Alyoshka begins each morning “whispering his prayers” (*One Day* 5,6). In contrast, Shukhov spends his waking moments thinking of ways to get extra food or worrying about whether he will get his fair bread ration that day (*One Day* 2, 5). Shukhov seems perplexed at the peace and joy of Alyoshka who lives solely on camp rations and nothing extra (*One Day* 49). While Alyoshka finds comfort and sustenance in his meditations on God, Shukhov finds his solace in bread. He lives for it, treasures it, hides it, and takes comfort in the thought of having extra stored away. Indeed, Shukhov’s meditations center on the size of his daily bread ration: “you checked every day to set your mind at rest, hoping you hadn’t been too badly treated.” He comforted himself with the thought that “[p]erhaps my ration is almost full weight today” (*One Day* 27). After washing floors, and before going off to work, Shukhov returns for his bread ration and finds Alyoshka lying on his bunk reading from a notebook in which he has copied half of the

Scriptures (*One Day* 26). One thing Shukhov greatly admires about the Baptist is the way he has managed to hide his Scripture from camp authorities for so long. While the Baptist reads aloud from his carefully hidden Bible notes, Shukhov breaks his bread ration in two, puts half in his hidden pocket, and sews the other half into his mattress hiding it as carefully as Alyoshka has hidden his own bread of life (*One Day* 27,28).

Solzhenitsyn was also quite concerned with portraying what he saw as a spiritual problem for both the prisoners and the Soviet nation as a whole. Ericson writes that “for all the bodies lost to the gulag, the greatest calamity [for Solzhenitsyn] is [the] spiritual devastation” (28). Around 1964, Solzhenitsyn wrote sixteen prose poems reflecting what he believed to be “the spiritual inadequacy of modern [Soviet] life” (Dunlop 317). His sketch “Starting the Day” relays Solzhenitsyn’s concern with a Soviet nation that has lost touch with spirituality and has become body-centered:

At sunrise twenty young people ran out into a clearing, lined up facing the sun, and started bending, squatting, bowing, lying face downwards, stretching their arms outwards, raising their arms above their heads, and rocking backwards and forwards on their knees. This went on for a quarter of an hour. From a distance you might imagine they were praying [. . .] no, they weren’t saying their prayers. They were doing their morning exercises.

No one in our time finds it surprising if a man gives careful and patient daily attention to his body. But people would be outraged if he gave the same attention to his soul. (qtd. in Dunlop 321)

Solzhenitsyn has Shukhov comment wryly on this loss of faith when he sees a young man sit down at the table and cross himself before eating. He says that the man must be a Western Ukrainian because “the Russians didn’t even remember which hand to cross yourself with” (*One Day* 15).

One might think that men struggling for their lives in a prison camp have every right to be self- or body-centered as their survival depends on it, and, in the process, they might lose touch with spirituality. In fact, Alfred Cismaru writes that the gulag prisoner struggling for daily survival gives little thought to the hereafter or earning rewards in the hereafter but only of the here and now and how to fill one’s stomach and stop the hunger pangs for awhile (103). Solzhenitsyn, however, hoped to bring attention to more than just the plight of the prisoners. He wanted change for his whole nation, and so he addresses the lack of faith and the focus on the physical, again through a bread motif.

Bread is on Shukhov’s mind all day, but unlike Alyoshka, who finds comfort and satisfaction from his spiritual Bread, Shukhov does not find fulfillment. His major concern is how to keep his stomach full; he worries constantly that someone may find and take his hidden hunk of bread (*One Day* 43). Upon returning to

camp at the end of the workday, he immediately checks to make sure his bread ration is still in his mattress (*One Day* 60). Late in the evening, Shukhov eats “his supper without bread”; he will save his portion for later because the belly always “forgets what you’ve just done for it and comes begging again the next day” (*One Day* 171). Near the end of the novel, Solzhenitsyn stages a confrontation of faith between Shukhov and Alyoshka. The Baptist tells Shukov that the only thing “the Lord has ordered us to pray for is our daily bread” – meaning spiritual bread (*One Day* 196). Shukhov comments simply, “You mean that ration we get?” (*One Day* 197). Critics have interpreted this comment as sarcasm or facetiousness on the part of Shukhov, but there is really no indication in the text that it is anything other than a manifestation of Shukhov’s concern with his own physical well-being.

The acquisition of food and preservation of self has become Shukhov’s religion, complete with a religious relic in the form of his ever-present spoon. He has carefully inscribed his culinary icon “Ust-Izhma, 1944,” perhaps the place and date of his conversion to this faith of self-preservation (*One Day* 16). Camp mealtimes now take on the aspect of acts of worship. Alyoshka spends time with God each morning and more time whispering with other Baptists on Sundays; but, in contrast, mealtimes are most sacred for Shukhov. He reverently removes his cap at the table for no matter “how cold it was, he would never eat with it on” (*One Day* 16). One must eat slowly and carefully, says Shukhov, “with all your thoughts on the

food [. . .] nibbling off little bits [. . .] turn[ing] them over on your tongue” because food is the focus of his being and because “apart from sleeping, the prisoners’ time was their own for ten minutes at breakfast, five minutes at the noon break, and another five minutes at supper” (*One Day* 17,54). At supper that night, Shukhov and another prisoner sit down to a double portion they have managed to wrangle, and Solzhenitsyn writes that they sat in total silence as “[t]hese minutes were holy” (*One Day* 169).

As threatening to life as the lack of food and the loss of faith is the loss of dignity for the prisoners, which could lead to mental and physical breakdown. Indeed, Shukhov seems to know the importance of maintaining a highly developed sense of dignity throughout his ordeal. He may resort to creative finagling in order to get extra food, but Solzhenitsyn tells us, never in his life has Shukhov ever given or taken a bribe from anyone and he “hadn’t learned that trick in the camp either” (*One Day* 48). This quest to maintain some form of dignity often shows up in the novel in the form of eating habits. Shukhov remembers the old gang boss who once told him that the men who go first are the ones who stoop to licking out other peoples’ bowls, and so he refrains from such behavior (*One Day* 2). Shukhov would eat fish eyes if they were still part of the head, but if they were floating loose, he wouldn’t touch them (*One Day* 17). Even in the filthy camp mess hall, spitting fish bones on the floor was “thought bad manners”; the prisoners carefully spit them on the table and then pushed them on the floor

before the next gang would sit down to eat (*One Day* 15). At the evening meal, Shukhov's attention is captured by the sight of an old man, a prisoner of many years, who sits straight and tall. Shukhov says admiringly, "You could see his mind was set on one thing – never to give in. He didn't put his eight ounces in all the filth on the table like everybody else but laid it on a clean little piece of rag that'd been washed over and over again" (*One Day* 172).

Finally, there is a single passage in which Solzhenitsyn almost echoes the sensations of comfort and prosperity that Laura Ingalls Wilder creates. Shukhov remembers the meals back home when, without a thought, they used to eat "potatoes by the panful and pots of kasha [. . . and] hunks of meat [. . . and] enough milk to make their bellies burst." Shukhov understands, though, that "in the camps this was all wrong," to have taken this bounty for granted (*One Day* 54). On this day he is thankful to simply have "finagled an extra bowl of mush at noon" (*One Day* 202). Rather than conjuring images of comfort and plenty, Solzhenitsyn works a kind of disturbing magic in raising food to literary art and turning our thoughts to the plight of the prisoners through his focus on their meager fare.

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