The Wall

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*To Olga Kosakiewicz**

We were shoved into a big white room and my eyes started to blink because the bright light hurt them. Then I saw a table and, behind the table, four men, civilians, looking through some papers. The other prisoners had been pushed together at the far end and we had to cross the whole room to join them. There were several I knew and others who must have been foreigners. The two in front of me were blond, with round heads; they looked just like each other – Frenchmen, I suppose. The smaller of the two kept hitching up his trousers, nervously.

It lasted almost three hours; I was worn out and my head was empty; but the room was well heated and I found it rather pleasant: for the past twenty-four hours we hadn't stopped shivering. The guards brought the prisoners up to the table one after the other. The four guys then asked them for their names and professions. Mostly, that was as far as they went – though sometimes they'd pop the odd question: "Did you take part in sabotaging the munitions?" or "Where were you on the morning of the 9th and what were you doing?" They didn't listen to the replies or at least they didn't seem to; they'd sit for a while in silence gazing straight ahead of them, and then they'd begin to write. They asked Tom if it was true he'd served in the International Brigade: Tom could hardly deny it, as they'd found the papers in his jacket. They didn't ask Juan anything, but after he'd told them his name they wrote for a long time.

"It's my brother José who's an anarchist," said Juan. "You know he isn't here any more. *I* don't belong to any political party, I've never got involved in politics."

They didn't reply. Juan continued:

"I haven't done anything. I don't want to pay the price for others."

His lips were trembling. A guard told him to shut up and took him away. It was my turn.

"You're Pablo Ibbieta?"

"Yes."

The guy looked at his papers and asked me:

"Where's Ramón Gris?"

"I don't know."

"You hid him in your house from the 6th to the 19th."

"No."

They carried on writing for a while and the guards took me out. In the corridor, Tom and Juan were waiting between two guards. We set off.

Tom asked one of the guards, "Well?"

"Well what?" said the guard.

"Were we being questioned or sentenced?"

"Sentenced," said the guard.

"And? What are they going to do with us?"

The guard drily replied, "The sentences will be communicated to you in your cells."

In fact, what they were using as our cells were the hospital cellars. It was dreadfully cold there because of the draughts. We'd shivered all night long, and in daytime things weren't much better. I'd spent the five previous days in a dungeon in the archbishop's palace, a kind of oubliette that must have dated back to the Middle Ages: since there were a lot of prisoners and not very much room, the prisoners were locked up just anywhere. I didn't miss my dungeon: I hadn't suffered from the cold there, but I'd been all by

myself; after a while it gets on your nerves. In the cellar, at least, I had company. Juan wasn't very talkative; he was scared, and also he was too young to have anything much to say. But Tom was a smooth talker and he could speak Spanish very well.

In the cellar there was a bench and four straw mattresses. When they'd brought us back here, we sat down and waited in silence. After a while, Tom said, "We're screwed."

"I guess so," I said, "but I don't think they'll do anything to the kid."

"They haven't got a thing against him," said Tom. "He's the brother of a militant, that's all."

I looked at Juan: he didn't seem to grasp what we were saying. Tom continued, "You know what they do at Saragossa? They make the men lie on the road and they run them over in lorries. A Moroccan deserter told us that. They say it's so they can save on ammunition."

"But they don't save on petrol," I said.

I was annoyed with Tom: he shouldn't have said that.

"There are officers who saunter along the road," he continued, "keeping an eye on it all, hands in pockets, smoking cigarettes. You think they'd finish the men off. Not bloody likely. They let them howl. Sometimes for an hour. The Moroccan said that the first time it almost made him throw up."

"I don't think they do that here," I said. "Unless they really are running short of ammunition."

Daylight came in through four cellar windows and a round opening that had been cut into the ceiling, on the left, looking out at the sky. It was through this round hole, usually closed by a trapdoor, that they unloaded coal into the cellar. Just below the hole there was a big heap of coal dust; it had been put there to heat the hospital, but as soon as the war started, the patients were evacuated and the coal was still there, unused; sometimes it even got rained on, since they'd forgotten to close the trapdoor.

Tom started to shiver.

"Fucking hell, I'm shivering," he said. "Here we go again."

He got up and started doing exercises. Each time he stretched out his arms, his shirt opened and revealed his white, hairy chest. He lay on his back, lifted his legs in the air and started doing the scissors: I could see his fat bum shaking. Tom was tough, but a bit on the podgy side. I reflected that rifle bullets, or the points of bayonets, would soon be sinking into that mass of soft flesh as if it were a slab of butter. This thought affected me in a different way than if he'd been skinny.

I wasn't exactly cold, but I'd lost all sensation in my arms and shoulders. From time to time I had the impression that something was missing, and I started looking all round me for my jacket, only to remember all of a sudden that they hadn't given me a jacket. It was a real pain. They'd taken our clothes off us to give them to their soldiers, and they'd just left us with our shirts – and those canvas trousers that hospital patients wear in the heat of midsummer. After a while, Tom stood up, came over and sat down next to me, breathing heavily.

"Feeling warmer?"

"No, I bloody well am not. But I'm out of breath."

At around eight o'clock in the evening, a major came in with two Falangists.* He had a sheet of paper in his hand. He asked the guard, "Those three – what are their names?"

"Steinbock, Ibbieta and Mirbal," said the guard.

The major put on his glasses and looked at his list.

"Steinbock… Steinbock… Got it. You've been sentenced to death. You'll be shot tomorrow morning."

He looked further down the list.

"The two others as well," he said.

"That can't be possible," said Juan. "Not me."

The major looked at him in astonishment.

"What's your name?"

"Juan Mirbal," he replied.

"Well, your name's on the list," said the major. "You've been sentenced."

"But I haven't done anything," said Juan.

The major shrugged and turned towards Tom and me.

"Are you Basques?"

"Nobody's a Basque."

He looked irritated.

"I was told there were three Basques. I don't want to waste my time chasing after them. So you won't be wanting a priest, of course?"

We didn't even reply. He said, "A Belgian doctor will come along shortly. He's authorized to spend the night with you."

He saluted and left.

"What was I telling you," said Tom. "We're stuffed."

"Yes," I said, "it's rotten bad luck for the youngster."

I said that out of a sense of fairness, but I didn't actually like the youngster. His face was too delicate, and fear and suffering had disfigured it, contorting all his features. Three days before he'd been a kid, a bit on the soppy side – which can be attractive enough; but right now he looked like an ageing queen and I reflected that he'd never get his youthful looks back, not even if they let him go. It would have been nice to have had a scrap of pity to show him, but pity disgusts me, and in fact he turned my stomach. He'd stopped talking, but he'd turned grey; his face and hands were grey. He sat down and stared round-eyed at the ground. Tom was a kindly soul: he tried to take him by the arm, but the youngster yanked it away, pulling a face.

"Just leave him," I muttered. "You can see he's going to start snivelling."

Tom reluctantly obeyed; he would like to have comforted the youngster; it would have given him something to do and he wouldn't have been tempted to think about himself. But it really

bugged me; I'd never thought about death because I'd never had any reason to do so, but now I did have a reason, and there was nothing else to do but think about it.

Tom began to talk.

"You bumped anyone off then?" he asked me.

I didn't reply. He started to tell me that he'd got rid of six since the beginning of August; he didn't realize the situation he was in and it was obvious to me that he didn't *want* to realize it. I still didn't fully realize it myself, I wondered if it hurt a lot, I thought about the bullets, I imagined the hail of bullets burning its way through my body. All this was quite beside the real question, but I was calm: we had all night long to understand. After a while Tom stopped talking and I took a sidelong glance at him; I saw that he'd gone grey too, and looked thoroughly miserable, and I said to myself, "Here we go." It was almost night, a dim light filtered through the cellar windows and the heap of coal and made a big patch under the sky; through the hole in the ceiling I could already see a star: the night would be pure and icy.

The door opened and two guards came in. They were followed by a man with blond hair, wearing a Belgian uniform. He saluted.

"I am the doctor," he said. "I am authorized to assist you in these painful circumstances."

He had a pleasant, distinguished voice. I asked him, "What are you here for?"

"I am at your disposal. I'll do all I can to make these few hours less difficult for you."

"But why've you come here to us? There are other guys out there, the hospital's full of them."

"They sent me here," he said vaguely. "Ah, you'd like a smoke, I bet?" he added hastily. "I've got some cigarettes – cigars even."

He offered us some English cigarettes and some puros, but we said no. I looked him in the eyes and he seemed embarrassed. I told him, "You're not here out of compassion. Anyway, I know

you. I saw you with the fascists out in the barrack square, the day I was arrested."

I was about to continue, but suddenly something happened that surprised me: all at once, I completely lost interest in the presence of this doctor. Usually, when I'm on to a man, I don't let go. And yet, any desire to talk left me; I shrugged and looked away. A bit later, I looked up: he was observing me with a curious expression. The guards had sat down on a straw mattress. Pedro, the tall skinny one, was twiddling his thumbs, while the other gave his head a shake from time to time, so he wouldn't drop off to sleep.

"Would you like a bit of light?" Pedro suddenly asked the doctor. The latter nodded: I think he had about as much brains as a log of wood, but he probably wasn't the nasty sort. Looking at his big cold blue eyes, it struck me that his one big failing was a lack of imagination. Pedro went out and returned with a petrol lamp that he placed on the corner of the bench. It didn't give off much light, but it was better than nothing: the night before, they'd left us in total darkness. I gazed for quite a while at the circle of light the lamp shed on the ceiling. I was fascinated. And then, all of a sudden, I woke up, the circle of light vanished and I felt crushed beneath a huge weight. It wasn't the thought of death, nor was it fear: it was something anonymous. My cheekbones were burning and my skull hurt.

I shook myself and gazed at my two companions. Tom had buried his head in his hands, and I could only see the thick white nape of his neck. Young Juan was far and away the worst off; his mouth was hanging open and his nostrils were quivering. The doctor went over to him and placed his hand on his shoulder as if to buck him up: but his eyes stayed just as cold. Then I saw the Belgian's hand slide surreptitiously along Juan's arm down to the wrist. Juan didn't react and remained quite indifferent. The Belgian took his wrist between three fingers, with an absent-minded air, and at the same time he took a step backwards and stood so his

back was turned to me. But I leant back and saw him take out his watch and look at it for a moment without letting go of the youngster's wrist. After a while he let the inert hand drop and went to lean with his back to the wall; then, as if he had suddenly remembered something important that he needed to note down there and then, he pulled a notebook out of his pocket and jotted down a few lines. "Bastard," I thought angrily, "he'd better not come feeling *my* pulse – I'll punch his ugly mug in for him."

He didn't come over, but I sensed him staring at me. I looked up and stared back. He asked me, in an impersonal tone of voice, "Don't you think it's freezing in here?"

He looked cold; he'd turned purple.

"I'm not cold," I replied.

He continued to fix me with a hard stare. Suddenly I realized why, and brought my hands up to my face: I was drenched in sweat. In this cellar, in the middle of winter, despite all the draughts, I was sweating. I ran my fingers through my hair, which was matted by the sweat; at the same time, I noticed that my shirt was damp and sticking to my skin: sweat had been streaming down me for at least an hour and I hadn't felt a thing. But it hadn't escaped the attention of that swine of a Belgian; he'd seen the drops rolling down my cheeks and he'd thought, "That's the expression of an almost pathological state of terror," and he'd felt how normal he was, and proud of it, since he felt the cold. I was tempted to get up and go and smash his face in, but no sooner had I started to shake my fist than my shame and my anger evaporated; I dropped back onto the bench, feeling quite indifferent.

I contented myself with massaging my neck with my handkerchief as, now, I could feel the sweat dropping off my hair down the back of my neck, and this was rather unpleasant. In any case I soon stopped massaging my neck; it didn't have any effect: my handkerchief was already wringing wet and I was still sweating. I

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